https://doi.org/10.21670/ref.2005047

Articles

Crossing borders: migratory strategies in transit of participants in migrants caravans

Batallando con fronteras: estrategias migratorias en tránsito de participantes en caravanas de migrantes

Eduardo Torre Cantalapiedra[a*] https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4074-3752
Dulce María Mariscal Nava[a] https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9296-2631

[a] El Colegio de la Frontera Norte, Tijuana, Mexico, e-mail: eduardotorrephd@gmail.com, dmariscaln@gmail.com

Abstract

At the end of 2018, several migrant caravans entered to Mexico with the purpose of reaching to United States. Their members, mostly from the so-called North of Central America—especially from Honduras—were fleeing poverty and violence in their countries of origin. This work analyzes the migratory strategies in transit of the participants in such caravans to overcome the obstacles on their way to the North, especially through Mexico. For this purpose, 47 interviews were conducted to Central American people in temporary shelters in the city of Tijuana, Baja California. We conclude that participation in such caravans constituted a new migratory strategy in transit that reveals, as well as challenges, the agency's capacity of migrants to achieve their migratory objectives.

Keywords: international migration, Central American migrants, migratory strategies, transit migration, Mexico.

Resumen

A finales de 2018, varias caravanas de migrantes ingresaron a México con el propósito de llegar a Estados Unidos. Sus integrantes, mayormente del denominado Norte de Centroamérica —particularmente de Honduras— huían de la pobreza y la violencia en sus países de origen. Este trabajo analiza las estrategias migratorias en tránsito de los participantes en tales caravanas para vencer los obstáculos en su camino hacia el Norte, especialmente en su paso por México. Para este propósito se realizaron 47 entrevistas a personas centroamericanas en albergues temporales en la ciudad de Tijuana, Baja California. Concluimos que la participación en tales caravanas constituyó una nueva estrategia migratoria en tránsito que pone de manifiesto, a la vez que desafía, la capacidad de agencia de los migrantes para el logro de sus objetivos migratorios.

Received on February 11, 2020.
Accepted on April 14, 2020.
Published on April 22, 2020.

ORIGINAL ARTICLE LANGUAGE: SPANISH.

*Corresponding author:
Eduardo Torre Cantalapiedra.
E-mail: eduardotorrephd@gmail.com

CITATION: Torre, E. & Mariscal, D. M. (2020). Batallando con fronteras: estrategias migratorias en tránsito de participantes en caravanas de migrantes. [Crossing borders: migratory strategies in transit of participants in migrants caravans]. *Estudios Fronterizos, 21*, e047. https://doi.org/10.21670/ref.2005047

Palabras clave: migración internacional, migrantes centroamericanos, estrategias migratorias, migración en tránsito, México.

Introduction

On October 13, 2018, a group of migrants[1] originating in Honduras, later called a "migrant caravan" by the media,[2] left with the objective of crossing Central America and Mexico together to reach the United States, some with the intention of remaining in Mexican territory or and some marching without knowing their destination. The motto of this first caravan eloquently illustrates the main forces that compelled them to leave Honduras: "we do not leave because we want to, we are expelled by violence and poverty" (cited in Meléndez, 2018). This first march was soon followed by others.

The broadcasting of these caravans via social networks on the Internet—Facebook and WhatsApp—, by the mass media—especially television—and through daily conversations contributed to an increasing number of people joining the caravans, mostly from countries of Northern Central America (NCA), in particular Honduras and, to a lesser extent, El Salvador and Guatemala.[3] Likewise, as they continued their incessant journey to the North, other migrants, who had previously begun their journey, joined.

According to official figures, more than 9 000 Central American migrants were in Mexican territory participating in the caravans in December 2018 (Jiménez & Canchola, 2018). The majority traveled hundreds of kilometers, crossing the Mexican territory, in a scenario in which the "rules of the game" of transit had been altered by and for such marches. This translated into new possibilities and challenges for migrants traveling through Mexico.

This work analyzes the migratory strategies used in the transit of the participants in the caravans to overcome obstacles on their way to the United States, especially during their passage through Mexico. Taking as a reference the concept used by Silva Hernández (2015), migratory strategies in transit are constituted by the use of those strategies by migrants in transit, understood as subjects with a certain capacity for agency, of personal, interpersonal and institutional resources that they are capable of

[1] In this work, the term *migrants* includes all those who mobilized regardless of the reason for emigration and the degree of voluntariness in the decision to emigrate. Therefore, we include those who are defined as *refugees*: "people who are outside their country of origin because of a fear of persecution, conflict, violence or other circumstances seriously disturbing public order and who, therefore, require 'international protection'" (Alto Comisionado de las Naciones Unidas para los Refugiados [ACNUR], 2016), labor migrants, migrants who are displaced by situations of extreme poverty, and migrants who seek reunification with their families, among others. Likewise, it must be taken into account that it is common for Central American migrants to provide more than one reason for their decision to mobilize.

[2] According to the *Diccionario del Español de México*, *caravan* is defined as "a group of people who gather together to go to a certain place in vehicles, on horse or on foot" (El Colegio de México [El Colmex], 2018). In this work, the terms caravan and march are used interchangeably.

[3] Among them, people who had been planning to leave their countries of origin for some time and whose life circumstances were unsustainable because of violence, poverty or both.

developing and employing, in a sequence of decisions and actions that are deployed to face the obstacles that stand in their way to reach their migratory destination.

Migrants from NCA not only face border crossings between Guatemala and Mexico and between Mexico and the United States but also within the Mexican territory, they must deal with the so-called vertical border. The latter consists of checkpoints deployed by the Mexican authorities and the presence of organized crime that aims to take advantage of migrants who move in conditions and under circumstances that make them vulnerable (Yee Quintero & Torre Cantalapiedra, 2016).

The analyses of the strategies of migrants and their families form a new field of study that investigates various migratory processes and considers protagonists to be those who are mobilized in origin (Jardón Hernández, 2011); transit (Villanueva Domínguez, 2012; Díaz Prieto & Khuner, 2014; Silva Hernández, 2015; Yee Quintero & Torre Cantalapiedra, 2016; Yee Quintero, 2017; Parrini Roses & Flores Pérez, 2018); transit and settlement (París Pombo, 2017, 2018a); destination (Pedone et al., 2014; Méroné & Torre Cantalapiedra, 2020); and facing the deportation of some of their members (Peláez & París, 2016; Rodríguez Gutiérrez & Torre Cantalapiedra, n.d.), among others. Likewise, this new research agenda considers the recovery of their voices a priority and establishes them as a counterpoint to the visions of international organizations and public officials who consider that the planning and management—control—of migrations can be carried out without taking into account the claims of the migrants themselves.

To achieve the proposed objective, this work is divided into three parts. First, migrant caravans are placed in the context of migrations from NCA and their transit through Mexico to the United States. Second, reviews the academic literature on migration in transit to build a framework for the composite analysis of five strategies: *1*. choice of routes and means of transportation; *2*. accompaniment; *3*. obtaining some type of immigration document; *4*. support in a welfare network: shelters; and, *5*. resort to *coyotaje* services. Third, through 47 interviews, in which we recover the migratory experiences of Central American people participating in the caravans of migrants arriving in Tijuana between November and December 2018, the transit strategies deployed by the members of these caravans are analyzed.

Context for Caravans of Migrants Transiting Through Mexico

Since the 1990s, the phenomenon of Central American migration in transit through Mexican territory, mostly from NCA, has been characterized by *1)* its large quantitative dimension and direction towards the United States; *2)* the prevalence of illegal status; and, *3)* having suffered countless abuses and attacks by criminal groups and immigration authorities (Calva Sánchez et al., 2015; El Colegio de la Frontera Norte [El Colef] et al., 2019*)*.

In the political actions of successive Mexican governments, in response to this migratory reality, control and the perspective of national security have prevailed; in this sense, the Mexican government has erected an official vertical border—a set of human and material resources deployed to control migratory flows throughout

Mexican territory—which puts migrants at continuous risk of being detained and deported by Mexican authorities from anywhere in the country (Silva Hernández, 2015; Torre Cantalapiedra & Yee Quintero, 2018). Recently, the Mexican authorities have incorporated an approach of protecting the human rights of migrant foreigners in transit through their various political and legal discourses regarding migration (*Migration Act* 2011, press releases of the Instituto Nacional de Migración [INM], among others), but there is little information and analysis on the practical significance of these changes.

Regarding the latest trends in Central American migration in Mexico, the upturn of people fleeing poverty and violence in their countries of origin bound for the United States is notable; in 2014, there were 418 000 transit events by Mexico, which includes a boom in the presence of women, children and adolescents (Rodríguez Chávez, 2016). Dense social networks in the United States, especially when migrants have strong ties, i.e., close family members, higher levels of security and higher wages are three factors that compel Central American migrants to choose the United States as their destination country, regardless of the reason for the departure from their countries of origin. This is not a goal for a growing number of Central American migrants, who remain in Mexican territory either because they reformulated or abandoned their plans to reach the United States or because they chose Mexico as a "final destination" (El Colef et al., 2019; Torre Cantalapiedra, 2020).

In any case, despite the upward trends, until recently, the volume of Central American immigrants in Mexico has remained relatively small (Giorguli-Saucedo et al., 2018), and there is always the possibility that migrants who remain in Mexico will, sooner or later, take advantage of certain opportunities to "resume" their journey to the North or return to their countries of origin.

To recover this context of migrations from NCA in transit through Mexico is important to understand the phenomenon of caravans because they are inserted and configured within long-term social processes that have occurred not only in the countries of origin and destination but also in transit. In this sense, there are several migrant marches that have traveled the Mexican territory year after year, making visible the violence that Central Americans suffer in their countries of origin and in transit through Mexico; the most prominent have been the Viacrucis Migrante (Migrant's Way of the Cross)[4] and the Caravan of Mothers of Missing Migrants,[5] which were consolidated and acquired political relevance as a result of the massacre in the municipality of San Fernando, Tamaulipas, in 2010, in which 72 migrants—mostly Central Americans—were killed by organized crime groups.

[4] The Viacrucis Migrante (Migrant's Way of the Cross) are political-religious protests composed of migrants and defenders of the human rights of migrants who, under different slogans, made various routes through Mexico following the migrant routes, carrying out protests and complaints (Vargas Carrasco, 2018; París Pombo, 2018b), reaching a presence in national and even international *mass media*. The fact that many of the migrants participating in the viacrucis did not have the documents required by Mexican law was the subject of disputes with the Mexican authorities. The treatment by the latter of these marches, regarding the irregular situation of its members, can be classified as ambiguous and contradictory, oscillating between two extremes: permissiveness (or even support) and repression.

[5] It is a "transnational initiative that for more than a decade has been dedicated to searching for missing migrant children on their way through Mexico to the United States" (Varela Huerta, 2016, p. 38).

The migrant caravans that arrived in Mexico in October and November 2018 differ from the traditional way in which migrants from NCA have traveled through Mexico—alone or in small groups—and have similarities with the migrant *viacrucis*, especially with that of March-April of the same year. To understand the nature of the marches at the end of 2018, a series of clarifications must be made. First, although it is not an atypical phenomenon from the point of view of the numbers of migrants, the way they travel together in large groups and in such a visible way is a novelty. Second, these caravans have surpassed previous media booms regarding the Central American migration phenomenon.[6] The highlight is that the media have accompanied Central American migrants throughout their journey from Honduras and other countries, making participants visible while crossing borders and transiting territories. Third, these caravans have more pragmatic than political ends, such as fleeing from violence and seeking a livable life (Varela Huerta, 2018) and protecting each other.[7] Fourth, numerous (CSOs) and many Mexican and foreign citizens have supported and accompanied migrants throughout their journey through the country. Fifth, the majority of the participants in the caravans at the end of 2018 received relatively less repressive treatment by the Mexican authorities—migrants in such marches along with their defenders were repressed in their "fight" with them, on the southern border of Mexico and their first steps through the country, vindicating the legitimacy of their migratory claims—than that offered in previous decades to migrants from NCA.[8] In any case, government actions were contradictory, ambiguous and, as usual, difficult to audit. Sixth, at the same time that the caravans marched, attracting almost all reflectors, many migrants continued to travel individually and in much smaller groups than the caravans, using *coyotes*. Seventh, as the marches progressed northward, their participants had access to opportunities and faced a series of challenges, which tested their ability to deploy strategies that would lead them to achieve their migration goals in the short, medium or long term.

Strategies in Transit

Next, an analytical framework composed of five types of strategies is presented, which in turn are crossed by three transversal dimensions: *a.* gender, *b.* the economic

[6] The media impact of migrant caravans was largely the result of tweets by the President of the United States, Donald Trump. In a first message on Twitter, Trump "informed" Honduran leaders of the withdrawal of economic aid if they did not stop the caravans. The threats soon spread to El Salvador, Guatemala and Mexico.

[7] This does not mean that this march will not have different readings in political terms. *i)* The same as their predecessors, these caravans have performed several protests and complaints. *ii)* The fact that thousands of migrants decide to march together and explore territories and borders with and without authorization from the states should be analyzed from different fields of study, including political science. *iii)* The caravans were politicized by leaders of Honduras, Mexico and the United States.

[8] Among others, *i)* in general, there was permissiveness/inaction regarding the irregular transit of the majority of the members of the caravans; *ii)* spaces, temporary shelters, have been created so they can stay overnight and temporarily reside; *iii)* a number of special opportunities to stay in the country—see, for example, the "You are at home" plan—have been offered; and, *iv)* TVRH cards were granted, among others. Other measures, including some of the above, have been widely criticized for being considered against migrants and in favor of containment.

resources they have and *c.* the information they have. Strategies that are not mutually exclusive were chosen both for being the most prominent in the academic literature and for adapting to the case of migrant caravans. None is fully infallible against all the risks that arise along migratory routes (Yee Quintero & Torre Cantalapiedra, 2016; Nájera Aguirre, 2016).

The Choice of Routes and Means of Transport

Migrants choose their routes taking into account factors such as the points of greatest vigilance of the authorities—both Mexican and American—, security—primarily to avoid organized crime—, the means of transport used, support networks, distance traveled and economic cost/resources available (Díaz Prieto & Khuner, 2014; París Pombo, 2016, 2017). To choose the main route to follow, migrants tend to take detours along the chosen routes to avoid certain dangers that they are able to foresee with the information they have (González Arias & Aikin Araluce, 2015; Yee Quintero & Torre Cantalapiedra, 2016).

Intrinsically linked to the choice of routes is the choice of means of transportation. Migrants use different types of transportation depending on their economic possibilities and whether they have documentation to cross through Mexican territory—even if they do not have documents to enter the United States on a regular basis.[9] Those who do not have money are forced to go on foot for longer distances and use freight trains to transport themselves (París Pombo, 2017).

Accompaniment

Accompaniment along the way can become a fundamental strategic tactic in terms of material resources—money, food, others—, information—especially spatial orientation and knowledge about the journey—, emotional support and protection that the companion can offer (Villanueva Domínguez, 2012; Parrini Roses & Flores Pérez, 2018). Thus, migrants can go out with family, friends and/or acquaintances or later join other people.

During the journey, new travel companions can be found, whether traveling alone or in a group. For many, these contacts are essential in the development of their trips, and some are cautious and selective when deciding with whom they meet (Villanueva Domínguez, 2012) because a bad choice can lead to situations of abuse and aggression (Willers, 2016).

Women have had a greater need to resort to accompaniment strategies due to special vulnerability in transit. They seek protection from men to face the dangers of the road, but these men, in turn, can become aggressors (Villanueva Domínguez, 2012; Willers, 2016).

[9] For a review of the routes and means of transport used by migrants, see, for example, París Pombo (2016, 2017).

In an investigation on Honduran migrants in transit through Mexico who travel without *coyotes* and use the network of shelters, they find that to better avoid the dangers related to crime and the Mexican authorities, some men who have sufficient economic resources and have experienced migratory groups prefer to travel alone (Yee Quintero & Torre Cantalapiedra, 2016).

Obtaining Some Type of Immigration Document

There are very few Central American migrants who obtain a visa to emigrate to the United States (París Pombo, 2017); therefore, a growing number of them apply for asylum and humanitarian visitor cards (tarjeta de visitante por razones humanitarias - TVRH) in Mexico to obtain documents that allow them to freely move around the country without being detained by authorities (París Pombo, 2018a).

Similarly, although they are excluded from the "usual" legal channels to enter the United States, there is the possibility of requesting asylum or participating in other types of programs that allow access to the United States temporarily or permanently. The Trump administration considers that Central American asylum seekers are opportunistic invaders who take advantage of gaps in the US immigration system (Department of Homeland Security [DHS], 2018; Averbuch & Semple, 2018).

The information to implement these strategies is obtained by contact with other migrants and by the data provided by shelters (Candiz & Bélanger, 2018) and CSOs, among others. Migrants who follow this type of strategy must wait months to be granted certain documents—which is a serious setback in their migration plans—and their applications are frequently denied.

Support in the Welfare Network: Shelters

Religious organizations, CSOs, international organizations, certain state actors and population groups support migrants in transit along migratory routes (Aikin & Anaya Muñoz, 2013; Candiz & Bélanger, 2018). The most relevant materialization of this support network is the shelters and refuges that provide migrants with lodging, food, medical services, legal support, information about their rights in Mexico, and travel recommendations, among others.

Taking advantage of these institutional resources, such as shelters, is a basic transit strategy for thousands of migrants from NCA who travel the roads with very low resources, especially those from Honduras (Silva Hernández, 2015; Yee Quintero & Torre Cantalapiedra, 2016). According to Díaz Prieto and Khuner (2014), women have a lower propensity to stay in shelters because they seek other alternatives for affordable accommodation that make them feel safer, among other reasons.

Resort to Coyotaje Services[10]

Despite the negative image offered by the media and government authorities of the activity of *coyotaje* services,[11] Spener (2008) considers their use a survival strategy much sought by migrants to achieve border crossing. Official figures show that the hiring of *coyotes* is a fully extended transit strategy among Central Americans to cross borders and territories in an "irregular" way (Díaz Prieto & Khuner, 2014, París Pombo, 2017).

Unlike the other strategies mentioned, which we could call "basic", in this case, resorting to *coyotes* implies leaving in the hands of others various decisions regarding the choice of routes and means of transport, as well as accompaniment by other migrants—at least on the parts of the route in which their services are used. To deploy this strategy, migrants seek, in preference, guides/*coyotes* of trust—those who comply with the agreement and enjoy a good reputation—for which they must achieve the necessary economic resources.

Analysis of the Strategies of Participants in Caravans

Between November 2018 and January 2019, 47 interviews were conducted[12] with migrants from NCA in temporary shelters in Tijuana, Baja California.[13] This allowed us to recover the migratory experiences of those who prolonged their participation with the bulk of the caravan to the US border and, through their accounts, to analyze migratory strategies in transit.[14] A total of 35 Honduran migrants, 9 Salvadoran migrants, 2 Guatemalan migrants and 1 Nicaraguan migrant were interviewed, of whom 9 were women aged between 22 and 52 years (4 alone and 5 with their husbands

[10] *Coyotaje* is an activity penalized by the state, performed by *coyotes, polleros*, or smugglers, who help migrants cross a border or territory irregularly in exchange for a certain amount of money (Torre Cantalapiedra, 2018).

[11] In recent years, the media have characterized the *coyotaje* of Central American migration through Mexico, after the uncritical recovery of the voices of state actors, as an illicit and lucrative activity that uses deception to take advantage of migrants, generating situations of migratory crisis, and that is in the hands of organized crime (Torre Cantalapiedra, 2018).

[12] The number of interviews was determined by the saturation criterion; that is, new interviewees were included until the information offered for understanding migration strategies in transit was similar to that described by previous interviewees.

[13] The interviews in Tijuana were conducted mainly in the vicinity of the places where the migrants were housed temporarily and precariously: 13 in the Benito Juárez Sports Unit in the center of the city, including the nearby street where they placed dozens of tents, and 32 in a space for concerts and other events, known as "El Barretal". Additionally, an interview was conducted in front of the "El Chaparral" border crossing and another in front of the offices of the INM.

[14] Those who arrived in Tijuana are only portion of those who once participated in the caravan. "Left behind" were those who returned to their countries at any point along the way, who were deported by the Mexican authorities, who sought refuge in Chiapas or another state of Mexico, who took advantage of an opportunity in Mexico to stay and work, who died on the way, who separated from the bulk of the caravan to follow other routes to access the United States undocumented or seek asylum, and who sought to reach other destinations within Mexican territory.

and children), and 38 were men between 18 and 63 years (17 alone and 21 with at least one family member, friend or acquaintance).

Most of the interviewees belonged to labor categories associated with low wages (agricultural workers, service workers, artisans and unskilled manual workers) who were in precarious economic circumstances in their countries of origin. Consequently, they undertook the trip to the North with few monetary resources (less than the equivalent of 4 000 Mexican pesos) or even without any funds. Except for two interviewees whose initial plan was to stay in Mexico, the first intention of the interviewees was to reach the United States.

To capture the dynamic nature of participation in the caravan, the analysis of the strategies deployed by the migrants interviewed is carried out taking into account different stages of their journey to the North.

Joining the Caravan: Accompaniment and Lack of Resources

Tamara (22 years old, Honduran, kitchen assistant)[15] and her husband had spent months wanting to set out on the road to the United States due to their precarious economic situation in Honduras and knowing the job opportunities they would find in the United States—he was deported from the United States, where his four brothers currently reside. They saw the caravan as their "only opportunity" to travel to the North: "we wanted to come, but we did not know how because we did not have money to pay a *coyote*, and to come alone is scary […] with the caravan, since it is quite many people, we take care of each other". In the experience of this couple, two fundamental and more evident attractions of the caravans are manifested: the massive accompaniment for the trip—with what that implies in terms of security, emotional and material support and information—, and that they are open to people with very low resources. This attractive force applies not only for people who are in their countries of origin but also for many people who are in transit.

Most of the interviewees perceive that traveling with the caravan is relatively safe, especially in terms of protection from criminal groups: "when you go alone, they can grab you and take you anywhere more easily" (Ignacio, Honduran, 25 years old, builder's assistant). However, this does not mean that they consider going in these marches free of risk and difficulties. Many migrants seek the company of family, friends and acquaintances while travelling with a caravan. A survey of caravan members in one of the temporary shelters in Tijuana indicates that women are much more likely to travel with accompaniment than are men. While more than half of the male interviewees undertook the trip alone, the majority of the women traveled with a family member (El Colef, 2018). However, this does not mean that all of women travelled with others for protection, primarily because in some cases, their companions are their young daughters and sons.

[15] Fictitious names are used to preserve confidentiality. The data retrieved for each interviewee are nationality, age at the time of the interview and last occupation in their country of origin.

Traveling with caravans is accessible even for people in poverty because it does not require having many economic resources to move—going on foot and mostly via rides/pull-offs—and to spend the night—shelters, tents and other roofed premises that were made available to them on the road, if not in the open—[16] and because of the solidarity of CSOs, the citizens and the participants themselves.

Several of the migrants interviewed consider this form of travel as their only option due to the impossibility of facing the high costs of using *coyotes*:

> One night, I came home from work, I remember, on a Saturday, and I started watching news on television, and I noticed that they were leaving San Pedro Sula at 6 in the morning. Well, I said to myself, "here is my chance" because I have no ability to pay the well-known *coyotes*; they charge too much (Pedro, Honduran, 42 years old, welder).

As the caravans advanced towards the North, through the media, social networks and conversations, other potential migrants became aware of the vicissitude of those who participated in such marches, but at the same time, they could more clearly see the advantages. "Since there was the opportunity to go out to this caravan without spending great amounts of money to come paying [*coyote*], we also decided to come, to see if we could also get to the other side" (Rosa, Salvadoran, 22 years old, agricultural worker).

Although in a small number, several of the interviewees who participated in the caravans had the support of relatives or sufficient economic resources to cover the high costs of *coyotaje*, which they considered as an option to resort to based on the evolution of the caravans because they expected that the costs of this service would become cheaper as they got closer to the destination, the United States. Francisco (Honduran, 21 years old, business owner), who had financial support from his uncles in California, planned to travel with the caravan and be picked up by his *coyote* of confidence once passing the southern Mexican border and part of the Mexican territory had been traversed.

Tearing Down Official Borders? Protecting Yourself Against Crime?

The stories of the migrants regarding their passage through the Mexico-Guatemala border and the treatment they received by the Mexican authorities after crossing it and in transit through Mexican territory are disparate. This is indicative that not all caravans, nor all participants in each of them, suffered the same fate.[17] The stories

[16] For many of the interviewees, the long walks were very difficult, and they observed how others gave up due to physical exhaustion at various points along the way. Those migrants who had resources could alternatively use busses and other means of transportation. Several migrants spent their savings on transportation that would allow them to reach one of the caravans at various points along the route. In Mexico, in addition to the rides they managed for days, from Guadalajara (Jalisco) to Tijuana and Mexicali (Baja California), they had the support of state authorities and CSOs to travel approximately 2 000 kilometers by bus.

[17] In this sense, recall that the interviewees in Tijuana are people who were successful in crossing the border between Guatemala and Mexico and that, therefore, the experiences of those people who were detained and deported by the authorities are lost, whose stories regarding the actions by the Mexican authorities, are possibly more critical.

recovered from the migrants, especially those who had previous migratory experiences, point to the fact that the majority of the participants in the caravans had fewer mishaps with crime and corrupt state agents and did not face the same official vertical border in force in previous times.

Most of the interviewees without migratory experience, apart from their participation in the caravans, consider that the authorities did not excessively hinder the passage of the march in which they traveled:

> The [Mexican] government sometimes stopped us, asked us for documents, but since we came with the caravan, it was not that difficult. I thought that they would not let us pass, to cross the line from Mexico. It was not that difficult for us, but we did battle for a while. […] I thought that […] arriving in Mexico, they would return us back. They behaved well (Federico, 58 years old, carpenter).

Those who have migratory experience can put their current experiences in the migrant caravan in perspective. Roberto (Honduran, 58 years old, own business), who left his native country due to death threats and to reunite with his wife and children in the United States, had a migratory experience in transit at the end of the 1990s:

> When I came from there [Honduras], I came walking. It was harder. We were walking on hills. I suffered! That is why I had said "I was not coming back", but since I took advantage of the arrival of a caravan, they opened the way for us. […] The first time I came, the Mexicans asked us for money; the policemen, the patrolmen asked us for money. If we didn't give, they threw us back. We paid them. We were like five, and among all of us, we came together for whomever did not have. […] This trip [with the caravan] has been calmer, more relaxed, because one comes with all the people; the police are leaving us free, all peaceful (Honduran, 58 years old, business owner).

In recent years, the official Mexican vertical border has posed serious challenges for migrants in irregular transit to reach the US-Mexico border. This reality left its mark on the experience of Guillermo (Salvadoran, 30 years old, waiter), who left his country of origin in March 2018 to flee gang violence, in the form of two deportations by Mexican immigration authorities. After two unsuccessful attempts to cross Mexican territory, he sought refuge with the Mexican Commission for Refugee Assistance (Comisión Mexicana de Ayuda a Refugiados - Comar), to obtain documents that allowed him free transit through Mexico. As soon as he obtained a TVRH, he traveled by bus from Tapachula to Mexico City, to join the caravan in its transit to Tijuana.

In contrast, some interviewed migrants who joined the marches in their final section from Mexicali and/or stayed in the same temporary shelters in the city of Tijuana as participants in the caravans had to deal with the vertical border. Since they crossed from Guatemala to Mexico and/or part of their journey through Mexico was alone or in small groups, without following the channels established by the authorities, they reported having been persecuted by migration agents in the south; indeed, some of their traveling companions were detained and deported, some having faced assaults on the trains in which they traveled.

Following the Route Traced by the Caravans to Tijuana

Following the caravans means that the migrants do not individually decide the routes by which they will transit to the United States and which border region they will approach. The first and subsequent caravans headed for the city of Tijuana—the same destination as Haitian migrants in 2016 (Yee Quintero, 2017). The bulk of the participants in the caravans at the end of 2018 went to this city.

There were several incentives to stay with the caravan on its way to the North: *i*) it was the safest route in terms of a reduced presence of organized crime; *ii*) moving without the caravan could expose them to arrest and subsequent deportation—these two circumstances indicate that the vertical border, both unofficial and official, continues to considerably shape the decisions made by migrants—; *iii*) therefore, following the majority offered advantages in terms of protection against the Mexican State and criminals; *iv*) it fostered the unrealistic idea that they would be allowed to enter the United States in an exceptional way; *v*) it solved the issue of the absence of economic resources to go by other routes; *vi*) it provided support by CSOs—including the provision of means of transport—; and, *vii*) it negated the lack of information by migrants on the border reality regarding the possibilities of legal and "irregular" crossing, among others. Thus, many migrants interviewed "let themselves be led" by the caravan.

Some showed some frustration and/or regret of having followed the caravan to that city because their intention to cross irregularly was hindered along that border strip. Carlos (Honduran, 42 years old, unemployed) followed the caravan to Tijuana due to a lack of resources but indicated his discontent because he hoped that the caravan had left for Reynosa or another border where his chances of achieving an undocumented crossing were greater. With two deportations in 2010 from the United States border, he considered that his chances of winning the "asylum fight" were slim.

According to the interviewees, a considerable proportion of the migrants split from the caravan, in different parts of Mexican territory, to follow their own migration plans "to other borders"—other parts of the border between Mexico and the United States. This possibility of leaving on their own seems to be related to having economic resources. Among others, it allows access to *coyotaje* services: "I found another friend. He did go there [Reynosa]; they paid whoever crossed him. He is already there [United States], and he writes to me and says, 'I'm already here'" (Esteban, Honduran, 27 years old, various jobs).

Trapped in Tijuana? Asylum, Coyotaje and Undocumented Crossing

At the beginning of December 2018, according to media sources, more than 6 200 Central American migrants had arrived in Tijuana (Martínez, 2018) following the routes traced by migrant caravans. Despite the obstacles they encounter in this city when trying to reach the United States—walls, bureaucratic obstacles, anti-immigrant

policies and policies against asylum seekers, etc.—, such as disinformation—a large number of rumors—and ignorance of the legal systems in Mexico and the United States to request international protection, all migrants have multiple options for mobility and permanence[18] and deploy decisions and strategic actions of various kinds. Next, we focus on those who persisted in their intention to reach the United States.

In the border region of Tijuana, different types of barriers have been erected since the 1990s to prevent irregular crossing. Therefore, one of the few feasible options to move to the United States from that city is through asylum applications.[19] To start the process, most of the migrants interviewed were on a list managed since 2016 by the migrants themselves, which means they waited[20] months to have the opportunity to present their case (Semple, 2018).[21] They faced what is known as *metering*, a US policy that consists of arbitrarily reducing the number of people who can initiate the process daily at each official port of entry to the United States and artificially delays the process, a strategy that aims to make the current applicants desist and discourage others from applying for asylum in the future.

A large part of the migrants interviewed who are on the list did not have plans to seek asylum in the United States when they began the trip, and the vast majority are almost completely unaware of the complex functioning of the increasingly restrictive political asylum system in the United States—despite several CSOs previously attempting to provide legal guidance in this regard. The interviews indicate that migrants, in a situation where decision-making becomes very difficult due to disinformation and uncertainties about the process, decide whether to request asylum or not, analyze the actions of other people who are part of their networks of family, friends and acquaintances and follow a strategy of imitation of those who were successful, but without any intention of taking advantage of a legal system that they do not know.

In this sense, the story of Oswaldo (Honduran, 38 years old, builder), who seeks to cross to the United States with his wife and stepson, is relevant. He was deported, so he wants to cross undocumented; however, he wants his wife and son to have access by requesting asylum. Based almost exclusively on the experience of other family members, he considers that it is better to request it at "another border" and not in Tijuana:

[18] Participants in the caravan in Tijuana can choose to *1*) continue trying to access the United States, either through asylum or some form of undocumented crossing; *2*) stay in Tijuana temporarily or permanently; *3*) migrate to another place within Mexico; *4*) search for another destination country different from Mexico or the United States (see, for example, Canada); and, *5*) return to their countries of origin through government repatriation programs or those supported by international organizations.

[19] Like Haitian migrants and other international and national migrants did in previous years (Yee Quintero, 2017).

[20] This wait should not be understood as a period during which migrants remain passive; on the contrary, the participants in the caravan use this time to generate various types of resources (economic resources and immigration documents, among others).

[21] The other way to request asylum has been to jump across border fences and be detained by the US authorities. This option, "without delay", involves several risks: confronting the US and Mexican authorities—who discourage these attempts with tear gas, the former, and with arrests, the latter—(Averbuch & Semple, 2018) or suffer physical injuries from high-altitude falls, among other reasons.

> Over there, families go to migration, and migration lets you go. Right now, three of her nephews and her brother-in-law were stopped. […] Her sister lives in Austin, Texas, and she requested the children with her husband to be brought to her, and they are already there. […] It's what I've been seeking over there. I'm afraid that she will surrender herself here [in Tijuana] to immigration and they deport her back. They will not do that to her over there. I have proven that they do not (Oswaldo, Honduran, 38 years old, builder).

The biggest problem is when the information is contradictory and there is no way to determine which is the best option: "Many things are said here; some say yes [they give asylum], others say no… a controversy" (Pedro, Honduran, 42 years old, welder).

Faced with the legal option of asylum, the migrants interviewed in Tijuana consider the possibility of "going backwards" and going through "other borders" to make an undocumented crossing, either on their own or through the use of *coyotes*. Sergio (Honduran, 25 years old, builder) wants to work a few weeks in Tijuana to save enough money to "go down" by bus to Monterrey and, from there, try his luck at a border crossing. His goal is to reunite with his parents and siblings in the United States.

Roberto (Honduran, 58 years old, business owner) has a previous immigration history in the United States that makes him fear that he will be rejected for asylum. Given that he has economic resources, he considers *coyotaje* as his best option to reunite with his children in the United States:

> I am afraid… of surrendering myself to immigration because they can deport me. I better pay a *coyote*, and as I was there, they will not know that I entered; they know that I already left. In addition, if I enter, they will not persecute me because they already know that I already left; if I enter like this [with *coyote*], there is no problem. They are not going to chase me (Roberto, Honduran, 58 years old, business owner).

Temporary Shelters and TVRH in Tijuana

Two temporary shelters were set up in the city of Tijuana: "Unidad Deportiva Benito Juárez" and "El Barretal". Although their conditions were precarious, the migrants had a place to spend the night, medical care, two meals per day, bus transport to go fix their papers before the INM—request a TVRH—and support from civil societies, with certain companies offering jobs, among other support measures. All these options allowed the participants in the caravans to wait for their asylum procedures and gather resources to go to other places in Mexico or to stay in the city.

The TVRHs and work permits that the migrants requested from immigration authorities in Tijuana were delivered through an *ad hoc* program faster and with fewer complications than usual. These are, for migrants, a strategic resource that can be used in different ways to achieve the goal of reaching the United States. Sergio (Honduran,

25 years old, builder) will work to obtain the resources that will allow him to try to cross into the United States through another area less controlled than Baja California. Others will use it, if necessary, to move freely through Mexican territory without being detained by the Mexican authorities. Thus, Félix, who travels accompanied by his wife and four children, considers a TVRH to return to Mexico in case the asylum "fails" in the United States:

> We are not sure; I have very large documentation, but we are not sure. Therefore, if they sent me to Honduras, I with that documentation, with that paper here, I can come by bus and not run away from anyone. I can come, I think, even by plane (Felix, Honduran, 63 years old, unemployed).

Already with a TVRH in his hands, Carlos (Honduran, 42 years old, unemployed) opted to return to Honduras with his family through a repatriation program of the International Organization for Migration. He prefers to wait there the three months that his relatives in the United States have indicated that they will need to collect the money to pay a guide. His plan is to go from Honduras to Reynosa in successive busses—which he considers possible thanks to his immigration document—and pay a *coyote* to cross the Mexico-United States border for $4 000, half of what a *coyotaje* service would charge him to take him to the United States from his community of origin.

In Conclusion, a New Migration Strategy

Our analysis is focused on the individual actions and strategies of migrants and their families.[22] From this point of view, participation in migrant caravans can be understood as a new survival strategy for migrants to confront migratory transit in a safer way thanks to mass accompaniment, understood as a powerful source of protection, information and material and intangible aid and that does not exclude people with low or very low incomes.

After entering the first migrant caravan in Mexican territory, a series of advantages and opportunities to participate in such caravans could be observed, which became tangible as they advanced through the national territory. Mexican authorities treated the caravan different than they treated Central American migrants in transit for decades: some "permissiveness"/inaction with respect to irregular transit and rapidly granting TVRHs, among other benefits.

Additionally, they received support from CSOs and individuals. When the shelters established along the migratory routes had no room for the large number of participants in the migrant caravans, the support systems that are typically found in these shelters were transferred to the places where the participants waited and spent the night; among such support was makeshift temporary shelters.

[22] Without prejudice to the importance of future analyses on migrant caravans from the perspective of collective action.

Although in a way different from *coyotaje*, participating in caravans also means giving up to others—in this case to the community—strategic decision making. Going by caravan involves adjusting to certain routes, times, means of transportation (going on foot, rides, or busses) and ways to spend the night. In this sense, the choice of Tijuana as a destination for the first and subsequent caravans was a setback for those who, for various reasons, were not considering applying for asylum and did not leave the caravan before arriving in Tijuana. It is not always possible to reconcile the individual migratory goal with participating in marches.

The traditional ways of crossing borders and Mexican territory are intermingled with participation in caravans. Those who have resources—or alternatively, the ability to move away from the marches—combine strategies of going by caravan and going by other routes, either alone or by paying *coyotaje* services.

All the participants in the migrant caravans have had to face the last border alone, which extends for more than 3 000 kilometers between Mexico and the United States. Thus, the interviewees who seek asylum face an increasingly restrictive system juxtaposed to the desire to achieve a better quality of life in the United States, often following a strategy of imitating the successful actions of family, friends and acquaintances.

TVRHs are a fundamental strategic resource for migrants who do not stop in their efforts to go to the United States, both to obtain the necessary funds to cover the high costs of the services of the coyotes and to enter and move freely through Mexican territory. Future research should analyze how TVRHs favor the integration processes of those who want to settle in Mexico. Likewise, to examine to what extent the increase in refugee claims—and of TVRH—corresponds to a strategy of migrants to move freely through Mexico and not to a true intention to stay.

Participation in caravans shows that migrants, even those with low resources, are capable of generating migratory strategies in transit to achieve their migratory objectives; however, this does not mean that caravans are exempt from difficulties because crossing borders—battling with them—implies constant challenges that participants face based on their knowledge, attitudes and economic resources. Furthermore, future research should analyze in greater detail the experiences and strategies of caravans as a group of migrants accompanied and supported by defenders: in terms of choosing routes, transportation, and places to spend the night and facing the authorities in different countries, among others. In this sense, organizational and social movement studies have much to contribute to the analysis of this migratory phenomenon.

In this work, we have exclusively referred to the caravans that arrived at the end of 2018, which had to battle with the Mexican authorities to transit the country. However, this is not how Mexican authorities treated subsequent marches. Better received was the January 2019 caravan that the Mexican government attended with "open doors" and with the widespread delivery of TVRHs, a document that allows both residing and working in Mexico for a year and traveling freely through the country. In contrast, the immunity that the caravans coming from NCA had to the general rules—detention and deportation, with seeking refuge in Mexico as the only alternative—ended in early 2019. From February of that year to the present, each caravan arriving in Mexico, or generated in the country, has been systematically dismantled—its members mostly detained and

deported or, where appropriate, "confined" to reside and work in the southern region of the country. Despite this, in March 2020, caravans were still being organized in Honduras because the needs to flee from those with fewer resources and to protect themselves along the way remain fully valid. This diversity of responses from the authorities is an opportunity for future research to analyze the experiences and strategies of participants in such caravans in the face of very diverse migration policies.

Acknowledgments

We are very grateful to Isabel Cantalapiedra Malaguilla for her invaluable support in carrying out this work. We also want to thank the Central American migrants who generously shared their time and experiences with us.

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Eduardo Torre Cantalapiedra

Spanish. PhD in population studies from El Colegio de México. He is currently a Conacyt Research Professor in the Department of Population Studies of the El Colegio de la Frontera Norte. He is part of the National System of Researchers of Mexico (Level 1). Research lines: international migration, migration policy, migration patterns and refuge. Recent publications: Torre Cantalapiedra, E. (2019). Uso de eufemismos en los discursos del Instituto Nacional de Migración sobre la migración en tránsito por México, *Andamios*, *16*(41), 385-412; and Torre Cantalapiedra, E. (2020). Destino y asentamiento en México de los migrantes y refugiados centroamericanos, *TRACE*, (77), 122-145.

Dulce María Mariscal Nava
Mexican. Master in international migration studies from El Colegio de la Frontera Norte. She has participated in different projects on migration in Mexico and the United States. She is part of the Conacyt Migrare Network. Research lines: migration, education and health. Recent publication: Mariscal, D. M. & Torre Cantalapiedra, E. (2018). Cinco elementos clave para entender la (re)inserción laboral de los migrantes retornados en México en el último decenio. *Ser-Migrante. Revista de la Organización Internacional de las Migraciones*, (59), 24-37.