

Mexico and Paradox of Boundaries

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Abstract

As a sovereign country, the Federation of the United Mexican States was born 200 years ago. With a history under the sign of national pride, Mexico is a true example of interculturality, but at the same time of xenophobia. One of the key elements in understanding contemporary Mexico resides in the idea of *Mestizaje* (the Spanish term for ‘miscegenation’) as expressed by philosopher José Vasconcelos. Almost 100 years after the first publication of his book *The Cosmic Race*, many of its topics still require more accurate and thorough research. In dealing with such a complex subject, one needs to take into consideration multiple levels of analysis like the physical and national boundaries, but also the cultural and social ones. In 2021, the government decided to commemorate the fall of the city of Mexico-Tenochtitlan as proof of 500 years of Indigenous Resistance.

In today’s Mexico, social and economic inequalities seem to be a heritage of the New Spain’s initial organization which was based on the caste system. That is why there are paradoxes and seemingly contradictory actions whenever Mexican state tackles issues such as borders, migration and identity. This is actually what I would like to address in this paper.

Therefore, if we want to understand current moral problems linked to migration in Mexico, we need first of all to grasp the complexity of the border history and cultural limits of the Mexican self-perception as well. Mexico denounces the abuses that Mexican migrants suffer in the U.S., but treat migrants from Haiti and Central America in a cruel and inhuman way, demonstrating the live Mexican Boundary Paradox.

Keywords: Boundaries, Mestisaje, Migration, México, Xenophobia.

For with whatever judgment you judge, you will be judged.
Matthew, 7:2.

Interculturality and boundaries are apparently the essence of Mexico. As a 200-year-old sovereign nation, Mexico has given rise to José Vasconcelos’s concepts of the *Cosmic Race*. In an essay on

race and the future of Ibero-American people, Vasconcelos discusses the ideas of Race and Nationality. Almost 100 hundred years after the first publication of his book, there are still several topics on which we should reflect upon. One of the main problematic aspects is the issue of physical and national boundaries. In contemporary Mexico, many Mexicans still “miss” those lands that were once part of the First Mexican Empire even if the Mayan area represents a different Mexico from that territory once conquered by the Mexica (Aztecs) or from the northern territories that Mexico aspires to win back someday. In 2021, the government decided to commemorate the fall of the city of Mexico-Tenochtitlan as proof of 500 years of Indigenous Resistance. Today’s social and economic inequalities seem to be a heritage of the New Spain’s initial organization which was based on the caste system.

This article shall address the current issue of migration and xenophobia using a socio-cultural approach. Mexico denounces the abuses suffered by Mexican migrants in the U.S., but treats in a cruel and inhuman way the migrants coming from Haiti and Central America. There are paradoxes and seemingly contradictory actions whenever Mexican state tackles issues such as borders, migration and identity. Xenophobia and malinchism⁵² coexist in the present-day Mexican reality. Some migrants are very well received, but others are treated as criminals and being denied their human dignity, the foundation of all rights. While European migrants find Mexicans a very welcoming, hospitable and generous people, migrants from Africa, Haiti or Central America see this land as a country full of hatred. I sincerely hope that this reflection will really help us explain at least a part of the live Mexican Boundary Paradox.

The first part of this essay will question the ideas of physical and national boundaries as reflected in the Guillermo Bonfill and Edmundo O’Gorman’s thinking. The second part will discuss the importance of Mestizaje in Mexico and will apply the metaphor of Axolotl in order to further explain the core beliefs and attitudes of Mexicans. This chapter also takes up the ideas contained in Roger Bartra’s *Cage of Melancholy: Identity and Metamorphosis in the Mexican Culture* and in José Vasconcelos’s *Cosmic Race*. Finally, I will insist upon the key concepts of malinchism and xenophobia as perceived in, from and outside Mexico relying on Zefitret Molla’s *a*

⁵² Called *malinchismo* in Spanish, it is a form of attraction that a person from one culture develops for another culture, a particular case of cultural cringe.

Treacherous Journey Through Latin America: The Plight of Black African and Haitian Migrants Forced to Remain in Mexico.

Physical and National Boundaries

Since its independence in 1821, Mexico aimed to be a national state. Constituents used thus the concept of Nation without discrimination. The new state pretended that the concept of nation/homeland expressed and promoted the very idea of Mexicanism, developing this way a pro-Mexican cultural practice. During the post-classical period (900-1521), the two major –Mayan and Aztec – civilizations dominated through their imperial structures the various peoples of Mesoamerica, Oasis America and Arid America. Mayans developed a system of independent state cities, while Aztecs had a centralized organization. These cultural areas created by anthropologist Paul Kirchoff⁵³ are still used today to explain pre-Columbian history and the geographically defined common characteristics of Central America and southern Mexico. When it was created in 1821 within the continental New Spain administration and General Captainship of Guatemala, the Mexican state was a mix of three cultural heritages, but represented also a new administrative proposal that actually transformed the existing Spanish organizational structure. Back then most waves of migration came from North Arid America and Oasis America as many people wanted to come and settle in wealthy Mesoamerica. “Historical contacts included those with the peoples who inhabited the areas north of Mesoamerica, in so-called Arid America. It was an unstable and fluctuating frontier. [...] Some Mesoamerican peoples originated as northern hunters and gatherers who migrated to and assimilated the agricultural, urban civilization of the south.”⁵⁴ It is vital to understand the aforementioned process: even if most of today’s waves of migration come from south to north, we can see it was not always that way, and the technological transformation of the XVIII and XIX centuries is what stands behind this phenomenon. It was a time when Mesoamerica was the economic and political heart of North America, but nevertheless I do not intend to elaborate here on that.

⁵³ Paul Kirchoff, “Gatherers and farmers in the Greater Southwest: a problem in classification,” *American Anthropologist* 56, no. 4 (1954): 529-550.

⁵⁴ Guillermo Bonfill Batalla, *Mexico profundo: Reclaiming a Civilization* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1996), 98.

I would rather instead show the challenges that Mexico had to face once it achieved its independence from Spain.

The new state pretended to be a nation even with its intercultural, multilingual and multiethnic reality in which the population from the largest area of the newly autonomous state lived (from actual California to Costa Rica and from actual Texas to actual Baja California). The first challenge was the definition of territory and its defense. Guillermo Bonfill Batalla explained as an ethnologist and anthropologist that the territorial definition of the new nation was an overriding concern for its first citizens. In principle, they inherited a land which had been divided into five provinces during the last years of Spanish domination. The riches and potential of all these lands could have been the patrimony of Mexicans, yet very quickly this was reduced due to the newly proclaimed independence of Central America, and a few years later by the loss of more than a half of the remaining territory to the greedy and much more militarized United States of America. The defense of the borders, especially the northern border, was a constant headache and led to measures which are reflected in many characteristics of modern Mexico.⁵⁵ It is also important to take into account the inefficiency of the Mexican state coupled with the lack of identity of the relatively few inhabitants of these northern territories given the fact that the capital has not been in contact with them and actually considered this population of no real value.

The political construction of modern Mexico can also be seen as a series of territorial reductions and military defeats. The Central American territories and the northern part of the new state opted rapidly for secession from the newly formed Union. This topic interested one of the most influential historians of the twentieth century, Edmundo O’Gorman. In one of his first books, *Historia de las divisiones territoriales en México*⁵⁶, he explains how national boundaries were a fundamental part of Mexico’s Nationhood. So, this aspect is extremely relevant. Even today, in the twenty-first century, many Mexicans think that the U.S. invaded Texas, and forget that Texas was initially an independent state, for ten years, and then its government decided to be a part of the Northern Union. O’Gorman’s main idea is that it is not just about politics and territorial control, the formation of the Mexican identity should be regarded not only from the perspective of the new country, but also from the nation’s point of view. O’Gorman and Bonfill Batalla agree

⁵⁵ Ibid., 98.

⁵⁶ Edmundo O’Gorman, *Historia de las divisiones territoriales en México* (Mexico: Porrúa, 1985).

upon the importance of the country's construction and territorial control.

In reconstituting the state and defining the acknowledged sociopolitical units, which are a legitimate part of it, it is not enough to reorder the territory to make it congruent with the borders of historically defined local societies. Broader social structures must be created for providing with its needed framework the civilizational impulse, which can survive on remnants confined within the local communities. [National collective] memory does not have to go back very far to recollect that in most cases the creation and current borders of the constituent states of the federation have been the result of recent historical decisions and negotiations. With only a few exceptions, these divisions cannot claim any historical continuity and are not based either on the real distribution of the population.⁵⁷

And this issue still prevails in XXI century Mexico. In 2021, the government changed the narrative regarding the 500-year commemoration of the fall of Tenochtitlan and promoted a “new” historical vision, namely an account of victory from the perspective of the defeated. In Mexican history, this vision has already been promoted seventy years ago by Miguel León Portilla,⁵⁸ but Andrés Manuel Lopez Obrador's government chose to insist on these 500 years of Indigenous Resistance, which is a very significant subject for understanding the actual attitude that the government and some of the social sectors have towards migration.

In fact, the notion of Indigeneity does not really exist in Mexico. Otomí, Nahuas, and Mixes do not see themselves as indigenous. An Otomí does not share his/her cosmovision, language or cultural and social practice with a Tarahumara or a Huichol. “There is not a Huastec state, nor a Maya one, nor an Otomi one, although all would have ancient reasons for existing. All would constitute necessary levels of social and political organization for those peoples to modernize their own particular civilizational projects.”⁵⁹ Mexico as a national state still has difficulties engaging with some parts of its history, and this may be viewed as a historical (multigenerational) trauma. This concept was very analyzed by lawyer and historian Edmundo O’Gorman.⁶⁰ In his *México, el trauma de su historia*, O’Gorman asserts that the historical-

⁵⁷ Bonfill Batalla, *Mexico profundo*, 173.

⁵⁸ Miguel León Portilla, *La visión de los vencidos* (México: Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, 1959).

⁵⁹ Bonfill Batalla, *Mexico profundo*, 173.

⁶⁰ Edmundo O’Gorman, *México, el trauma de su historia* (México: Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, 1977).

geographical entity called America did not enter the realm of western culture as a result of a discovery, but was an absolute invention. The invention of America actually made the update of a renewed idea of Europe possible in the *New World*, which involved the transplanted of two diverse major European civilizations in these new lands. That was also the reason for the foundation of the two Americas, the Saxon and the Latin, and that led to the great dichotomy in the American history.⁶¹ This very idea has important consequences in today's Mexico. For O'Gorman, the key actor within the independence movement was the *Criollo*. For him, the figure of the colonial criollo was the one who saw the New Spain as his homeland.⁶² An interesting question for O'Gorman would be that the *Criollo* lived in a kind of cultural and intellectual island (isolation), while the motivation for his independence from Spain was not inspired by the Independence of the Thirteen Colonies, but by the European political turmoil stirred by the French Revolution. Once Mexico was declared independent, everything changed and the *Criollo* was suddenly exposed to Modernity. "By highlighting the urgency in which the new nations were seen in attending and resolving the problem of their identity, we indicate the reason for being and the beginning of the historical-ontological process that constitutes the central theme"⁶³ of nationalism in America and more precisely in Mexico. The contact with modernity provoked a clash between two visions: *the conservative* and *the liberal*.

During the nineteenth century, Mexico entered a new and very conflictive era. It took almost sixty years to stabilize and pacify the country politically, and during that time, as said, Mexico lost half of its territory. By the end of the nineteenth century, the government of Porfirio Diaz intended to modernize Mexico and established a 30-year "peaceful" environment. Part of the *Pax Porfiriana* was made possible by the incorporation of foreign investment and the migration process. The development assistance or cooperation was no longer received exclusively from European countries as Spain, France or England, but came now also from the United States, the new dominant nation in America. The government had no more rivals, and the tension between conservative and liberal forces was suppressed and united within this new political era. The conflicts of the first years of the Mexican nation ended, and by the end of the nineteenth century a peaceful climate was instated. At the same time, new waves of migration began: Europeans, Canadians,

⁶¹ Ibid., 6.

⁶² Ibid., 11-15.

⁶³ Ibid., 17.

Americans, Chinese and Lebanese saw Mexico as a land of opportunity. Modernization brought a shift in mentality, and so the Mexican society began to be oriented towards modernity, and one of its most complete expressions was the development of positivist scientism. Doctrine was of course important, but now more important became all the wishes and aspirations linked to the promise of a better world included technical industrialization, science and progress. This project was inevitably a foreign one in the broad and double sense of influence on the education and habits of Mexicans, and impact over the technical and economical areas as well. The exploitation of resources and the development of infrastructure triggered the march of Mexico, but also allowed foreigners to control the resources of the young state. (As we can see in the debates held recently concerning a possible Electricity Reform in Mexico and the exploitation of Lithium, the issue is still under discussion.) All these and a common standard of living for most of the population would eventually be the right way of attack against the *Porfiriato*, presented of course as an elitist dictatorship and involuntary builder of new colonialism.⁶⁴ Like everywhere else there are pros and cons, but submission to outlanders, and political and social inequalities have sown disturbance and confusion among all those left out of this scientific-progressive project. For us that was also an explanation of that dual feeling towards foreigners, of racism and xenophobia on one side, and admiration and malinchism on the other side. National and physical boundaries are inexorably generating cultural and social boundaries that we also need to understand if we want to comprehend our paradoxical attitude toward migration and migrants.

Mestizaje and the Metaphor of the Axolotl

Racism and xenophobia in Mexico should not be confused with the way Anglo-Saxons conceptualize racism because they entail a cultural challenge of attraction and hatred at the same time. For example, “gringos”, one of the names used to define Americans, shows how foreigners can inspire in Mexicans both awe and spite. Some historians see *la Malinche*, the interpreter and woman of Cortés, as a symbol of the complex relationship between Mexican culture and otherness. But as historian Ursula Camba Ludlow states: “One of the most absurd myths, but one that has gained more strength thanks to the recently imported guilty Anglo-Saxon discourse, is that the Spaniards were white and racist, as if

⁶⁴ O’Gorman, *México, El trauma*, 64-65.

they were the very same Mayflower pilgrims.”⁶⁵ An essential key to understand racism in Mexico is the concept of *Mestizaje*, the miscegenation, an idea that exists only within Mexico’s cultural and social boundaries. José Vasconcelos invented this idea in his famous book, the *Cosmic Race*, in other words the summum of his “lifelong battle against feelings of Latin American inferiority vis-à-vis the mighty Anglo-Saxon neighbor.”⁶⁶ Vasconcelos tried to boost Latin American self-confidence and self-awareness using the idea of Race as a key element to explain how Latin America was more than a copy of Anglo-Saxon America or Spanish cultures. In his view, self-consciousness was only possible through this notion of miscegenation, that he opposed to the notion of *blanqueamiento*, whitewashing. So, he chose instead to promote the idea that the Cosmic Race, the bronze race, was the foundation of a higher form of civilization. He defended that way the idea that a new man was possible and that new man could be created in Latin America. This concept was truly transcendent for the men who fought for the ideal of the Mexican Revolution. But even if a new self-awareness did emerge, it has not sufficed to give to the Mexican people a new way to think of foreigners as their equals. New emancipation from the U.S. is still promoted by philosophers like Enrique Dussel, for example. The first emancipation has finally been achieved and Mexicans do not think that they are a colony of the *Madre Patria*, their once Motherland Spain. The explanation provided by Vasconcelos is fundamental in order to understand the Mexican Character, but it is not enough. Four years after the publication of his book, Vasconcelos participated in a political election and was confronted with the political reality of Mexico. The experience was so strong that he truly began to question his own theory. He was “deeply disappointed with the social and political reality in Mexico [... and] referred to mestizos as the ‘comic’ instead of ‘cosmic’ race.”⁶⁷ The national character of Mexico and the Mexican idea of self-consciousness will be definitely challenged in the late eighties by sociologist Roger Bartra. In his 1987’s book, *The Cage of*

⁶⁵ Ursula Camba Ludlow, “Los españoles eran blancos y racistas,” *Relatos e historia en México*, November, 2021, <https://relatosehistorias.mx/nuestras-historias/los-espanoles-eran-blancos-y-racistas>.

⁶⁶ Jeroen Dewulf, “Miscegenation,” in *Transnational Modern Languages: A Handbook*, ed. Jennifer Burns and Derek Duncan (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2022), 211. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv2fjwpw7.27>.

⁶⁷ Dewulf, “Miscegenation,” 215.

Melancholy: Identity and Metamorphosis in the Mexican Culture,⁶⁸ he proposes a new way to understand Mexicanism. He assumes the Baroque past and present of *Mexico* (emblematically represented by Bolívar Echeverría⁶⁹ and Samuel Arriarán⁷⁰) and offers a new understanding of the Mexican cultural and social nature by comparing it to the Axolotl, an endemic species of Mexico, which now survives only in Xochimilco, in the southern part of Mexico City.

An axolotl is an actual larva-like aquatic amphibian, swimming in the waters of Mexico, which never metamorphoses into a salamander, as expected, fact that is misunderstood by both Europeans and Mexicans as they keep this peculiar species as subject to constant scrutiny. For Bartra, the axolotl is the Mexican, always on the brink of change, always misunderstood and melancholic. The axolotl is a mirror of the entire Mexican national culture.⁷¹ Roger Bartra realizes the problem of using the Axolotl as a way to illustrate mexicanness. In the presentation of his book he directly addresses the topic explaining his choice to the reader: [...] Developing the metaphorical theme of the axolotl, that most Mexican amphibian which inhabits the lakes “where the air is clear.” The Nahuatl word *axolotl* has been translated as “water game,” and it is evident that its mysterious dual nature (larva/salamander) and its repressed potential for metamorphosis are elements that facilitate the use of this curious living thing as a figure to represent the Mexican national character and the structures of political mediation obscures. I am aware that by engaging the metaphor of the axolotl I am violating reality: it is my admitted intention to force the introduction of the Mexican imagery of the national character into a canon or set of stereotypes and to observe, afterward, that the canon appears in Mexican political culture as a tragicomic representation of the everyday life of the mass of the people. I shall call this the canon of the axolotl. As will be shown, the use of the axolotl as a metaphor of political culture

⁶⁸ Roger Bartra, *The Cage of Melancholy: Identity and Metamorphosis in the Mexican Culture*, trans. Christopher J. Hall (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1992).

⁶⁹ Bolívar Echeverría, *La modernidad de lo barroco* (México: Ediciones Era, 2013).

⁷⁰ Samuel Arriarán, *Barroco y neobarroco en América Latina, Estudios sobre la otra modernidad* (México: Editorial Itaca, 2007).

⁷¹ Steven Joseph Loza and Jack Bishop, *Musical cultures of Latin America: global effects, past and present* (Los Angeles: Department of Ethnomusicology and Systematic Musicology, University of California, 2003), 22.

provokes certain associations between the social facts and the biological phenomena, associations of ideas that have traditionally been located at the root of nationalistic belief. The recapitulationist ideas of Ernst Haeckel (to which the axolotl is very relevant) had their correlates in sociology, politics, and psychology. The belief that the development of the individual recapitulates the evolution of the species has its parallel in the idea that nations, like people, pass through a complete life cycle (infancy, youth, maturity, old age, and death). Jung's ideas on the collective unconscious and archetypes are also an expression of this parallelism.⁷²

I find this explanation extraordinary, and I think that even in his fundamental work, Bartra did not really address this crucial matter of how Mexicans relate to foreigners or migration. In fact, the metaphor allows us to better understand the way Mexicans are at the core of their being, and then implicitly the way they treat others. *Mestizaje* is no longer the concept that provides us with a sufficient understanding of the Mexican true identity or the reason why Mexicans behave the way they do towards migrants. There is, as we have seen before, a duality in the relation with the other one, the stranger, characterized by admiration and malinchism, but at the same time by hatred and xenophobia.

Malinchism and Xenophobia

A key figure in understanding the attraction Mexicans have for foreign cultures is Malinztin, also known as Malinche or Marina, all in fact different names of one and the same person, i.e. the interpreter and American woman of Hernan Cortés. This enigmatic character, Malintzin, an enslaved woman, was in truth a very gifted one, being not only a translator, but also a cultural advisor and negotiator to Cortés. This feminine figure is so complex that even in contemporary Mexico she is regarded as heroine and traitor. Her role is so important that she has been the main figure of various mass-media projects. On a social or cultural level, she is seen as the epitome of both *Mestizaje* and Ethnonationalism.

Like many key historical agents, Malinche/Marina has acquired importance as a mythic figure. From the time those first messengers reached Moctezuma, down to the very present, she has remained a site for the ongoing negotiation of meaning and self-understanding in Mexican America. [...] Her very presence

⁷² Bartra, *Cage of Melancholy*, 7.

contradicts, for example, canonical ideologies of the conquest as a straightforward relation between victimizers and victims.⁷³

Her impact is so powerful that nowadays when some Mexicans admire and welcome foreigners, people who do not share their views insult them calling them “malinchistas”, and this is because in “Mexican popular mythology [she] is remembered as a traitor, the indigenous woman who sold out to the Spanish conquistadores. She plays a negative role opposite two powerful positive symbols from Mexican history: Cuauhtemoc, the last Aztec ruler and a symbol of heroic resistance to the invaders, and the Virgin of Guadalupe, the national saint created out of the intersection of Christianity and Aztec religion.”⁷⁴

Being at the same time Cortés’s woman, she gives birth to the concept of *Mestizaje* as well. Malintzin and Cortés had a boy, Martin, who is known in Mexican history as *the Mestizo* and is believed to be the first case of Latin American miscegenation.

I do not intend to explore more deeply the relevance of this character that is why I limit myself to present him only as the prototype of *Mestizo*, or an example of how *Mestizaje* can be a new possibility of development. Not all thinkers believe that *Mestizaje* is a concept of union, inclusion and harmony. Some of them, such as historian Federico Navarrete, think that this concept is problematic: “This supposedly inclusive concept excludes since it defines who can be integrated and who cannot, and leaves aside important population groups such as indigenous people, people of African or Asian origin, or Jewish immigrants and other supposedly incapable groups to assimilate.”⁷⁵ The way Mexicans treat migrants changes radically when they are originally from Argentina, France, Russia or Ukraine (even in these complicated times) or when they come from Africa, Haiti or Central America.

Migration is a problem that has worsened lately in the world. This is not a new phenomenon, there have been migrations throughout human history due to different causes, mostly related to the pursuit of survival. At the present time, migration is nevertheless simultaneously recorded on a global scale, and is constantly and gradually increasing. “In 2019, the number of international migrants worldwide [...] reached almost 272 million

⁷³ Mary Louise Pratt, “‘Yo Soy La Malinche’: Chicana Writers and the Poetics of Ethnonationalism,” *Callaloo* 16, no. 4 (1993): 859-860. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2932214>.

⁷⁴ Pratt, “Yo Soy La Malinche,” 860.

⁷⁵ Federico Navarrete, “La idea del mestizaje es excluyente y origen del racismo en México,” UNAM Global, 9 de agosto de 2017, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=goZmDE_KEcg&t=14s.

(from 258 million in 2017). Female migrants constituted 48 per cent of international migrants. There were an estimated 38 million migrant children, three out of four international migrants were of working age, meaning between 20 and 64 years old. 164 million were migrant workers. Approximately 31% of the international migrants worldwide resided in Asia, 30% in Europe, 26% in the Americas, 10% in Africa and 3% in Oceania.⁷⁶ The Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC)⁷⁷ reported that, in 2017, Latin America had 1 out of every 7 migrants worldwide, approximately 37 million people. In recent years, this continent has experienced constant and increasing migration, caused by the ongoing crises from the countries it comprises. In 2015, for instance, 3.7 million Venezuelans fled their country: “80% of them resettled within the region. According to UN projections, by the end of 2019 the number of Venezuelans who will have left their country will reach 5.4 million, exceeding the sum of the populations of Madrid and Barcelona.”⁷⁸ As historian Amílcar Carpio Pérez explains, the United States has been a pole of attraction for migrants due to the enormous economic disparity it has with other countries in the region. The Mexican migration flow has been the largest regional one and Mexico remains the main migration corridor worldwide:⁷⁹ “in 1990 there were 4,395,365 migrants, in 2000 the number increased to 9,562,929, by 2010 it rose to 12,414,825 migrants, by 2017 there were 12,964,882 and in 2019 there was a slight decrease when 11,796,178 Mexican migrants were deported.”⁸⁰ About 98.5 percent of Mexican migrants go to the United States and Canada.⁸¹

But recently, as Carpio Pérez noted, the phenomenon of Central American migration is the one having the most accelerated

⁷⁶ “Global issues, Migration,” United Nations, Peace, dignity and equality on a healthy planet, last modified May 2021, <https://www.un.org/en/global-issues/migration>.

⁷⁷ Also known as CEPAL for its Spanish name: *Comisión Económica para América Latina y el Caribe*.

⁷⁸ Antonio Estevadeordal, “América Latina: la oportunidad de la migración,” *esglobal*, 3 de junio de 2019, <https://www.esglobal.org/america-latina-la-oportunidad-de-la-migracion/>

⁷⁹ Carlos Serrano Herrera y Rodrigo Jiménez Uribe, *Anuario de Migración y Remesas México / Yearbook of Migration and Remittances México* (México: Fundación BBVA Bancomer/ CONAPO, 2021), 16.

⁸⁰ Amílcar Carpio Pérez, “Make your fear a prayer: affective life in migratory processes (fear and feeling of security),” *Revista SOMEPSO* 6, núm.1 (2021): 132.

⁸¹ Carlos Serrano Herrera y Rodrigo Jiménez Uribe, *Anuario de Migración y Remesas México / Yearbook of Migration and Remittances México*, 44.

growth. The so-called Northern Triangle of Central America (TNC) made up of Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador is the region with the greatest increase in migrants at the moment. “In recent years, irregular migration from the region has been on such a scale that it has surpassed migration from Mexico, traditionally the leading source of migrants across the US southern border.”⁸²

The economic issues raised by these phenomena are very significant for this region: “remittances have become a key element of the Northern Triangle’s economic activity, accounting on average for 18 percent of the countries’ GDP.” The lives of these migrants continue to be complicated and unstable because of their undocumented and irregular status. “Half of migrants from the Northern Triangle in 2017 were irregular (750,000 Salvadorians, 600,000 Guatemalans and 400,000 Hondurans).”⁸³ Migration ratios have increased significantly in the last four decades. “The total Central American-born population in the United States has grown more than tenfold since 1980, and by 24 percent since 2010. The 3.8 million Central American immigrants present in 2019 accounted for 8 percent of the U.S. foreign-born population of 44.9 million.”⁸⁴ The cases of Venezuela, Mexico and Central America are just proof that this is a ubiquitous problem all over the continent with various nuances and particularities.

Beyond the demographic and economic data from the immigration sphere, this problem also has social, psychological and emotional consequences, which are recorded from various testimonies all around the world. There are a few hazards stemming from the undocumented migration. This phenomenon represents undoubtedly one of the most pressing issues in Latin America. People who are forced to migrate seek in some way to be as protected as possible on their journey, and faith and devotion⁸⁵ are as a

⁸² Emmanuel Abuelafla, Giselle Del Carmen and Marta Ruiz-Arranz, *In the Footprints of Migrants: Perspectives and Experiences of Migrants from El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras in the United States* (New York: Inter-American Development Bank, 2019), 4. <http://dx.doi.org/10.18235/0002072>.

⁸³ Abuelafla, Del Carmen and Ruiz-Arranz, *In the footprints of migrants*, 6.

⁸⁴ Erin Babich and Jeanne Batalova, “Central American Immigrants in the United States,” The online journal of the Migration Policy Institute (2021), <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/central-american-immigrants-united-states/>.

⁸⁵ In this context, Faith and devotions seem to be the only moral support for migrants. Saints and other spiritual figures give migrants some protection. Different Faith Based Organizations and other human rights organizations also support them in their journey and many times enter in conflict with the State’s organization.

matter of fact their main support because most of the legal institutions regard them as a threat. These migrants wish to find, of course, protection before leaving on their journey, and they would like to be able to count on social institutions that could take care of their families in their absence, provide them with the necessary help at the border, keep them out of any harm and violence, etc. but in reality even countries with a similar problem and with a significant percentage of their population migrating, do not treat them with dignity and respect. This question of human dignity is linked to political and cultural issues, too. During the first month of Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador's government, great expectations arose within the migrant communities and human rights activists' groups. But soon enough, as in so many other Latin American countries, Mexico has begun to be an "unofficial" third-secure country, and we can all witness the fact that the government actually aligned once again with the U.S. public policies regarding migrations.

One of my students, Zefitret Mola, conducted a quite interesting study regarding the current situation we are living here in Mexico. She conducted the investigation for her thesis in 2020. Her thoughts on this phenomenon are fundamental to understand the complex xenophobia that exists in Mexico.

The growing presence here of African and Haitian migrants poses a new set of challenges to a country which is already struggling to acknowledge the existence of Afro-Mexicans, and where Mestizaje still dominates the national discourse on race. Due to the restrictive U.S. and Mexican immigration policies since 2016, many migrants have found themselves forced to remain in a country they had only intended to transit through on their journey northward to the United States. Mexico has only recently taken a few necessary steps to recognize its Afro-Mexican population which had been so far marginalized and erased from history. But all these have only been taken at declarative level and even so to a quite small extent. By drawing on in-depth interviews conducted with Cameroonian and Haitian migrants in Tijuana and analyzing the U.S. and Mexican immigration policies affecting these communities, this paper aims precisely to shed some light on the specific problems that are besetting Black, generally non-Spanish speaking migrants in Mexico, because of their interlacing identities. African and Haitian migrants face particular challenges due to their status and their in a country where the majority of the population is not Black, and their lack of Spanish-speaking skills, which obviously hinders their access to services, making their life in Mexico harder. Appropriate measures should be adopted by the

Mexican government to provide assistance and support to these African and Haitian migrants, whose intersecting identities increase their vulnerabilities.⁸⁶

Conclusion

The migration issue is wide-ranging and therefore needs to be delimited. In this article, I was interested in rescuing a vision which is part of the beliefs, practices and attitudes that Mexicans have in their country towards migrants. That is why I firmly believe the cultural elements directed against migration and expressed via xenophobia or malinchism need to be addressed. Similar things happen in different parts of the continent, and it is clearly not a South-North problem, but a more horizontal one. At the same time, the Mexican government asks the U.S. government to respect the human dignity of Mexican migrants without thinking that the Central Americans, Haitians and Africans living in Mexico are equally human individuals.

My goal was to build the argument on a three-story thesis in order to show the complexity of the topic. The first point discussed in my paper was therefore the construction of Mexico as a national state, and how boundaries and frontiers play a role that goes beyond the political and administrative matters. The historical construction of the Mexican nation is founded upon hatred and admiration at the same time for foreigners. The second point I considered was the importance and limits altogether of the idea of Mestizaje, and in this spirit I saw fit to present the key figure of Axolotl used as a metaphor for the Mexican culture and behavior. The axolotl is a larva-like aquatic amphibian, a living creature that wants to but will never grow up. My final point was to show both sides of migration in Mexico: xenophobia and malinchism (hatred and idealization of foreigners). My sociocultural analysis was the guide meant to provide uniformity to the present paper enabling thus a better understanding of the context, the socio-cultural implications, the roots of the problem and the actuality of this phenomenon, as well as the reason why it has persisted for so long and is still a very pressing matter. This article envisages quite a broad time frame, although due to the constant increase in

⁸⁶ Zefitret A. Molla, "A treacherous journey through Latin America: The plight of Black African and Haitian migrants forced to remain in Mexico" (Master Thesis, University of San Francisco, 2021).
https://repository.usfca.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=2468&context=the_s.

migration in recent decades, I consider that the assessment, as reflected in different regions of the continent, should be limited to the 21st century.

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