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BORDERING THEATRICALITY: MEXICO'S MASS EXPULSION OF INDIAN CITIZENS

Amalia Campos-Delgado

Summary: Inspired by dramaturgical sociology, this paper proposes to consider the state-led oriented and crafted visibility of border practices as "dramatic performances". Using this approach, it examines the mass deportation of 311 Indian citizens from Mexico and the intentional official visibility given to this expulsion, as well as the backstage dynamics concealed from the public eye.

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Mexico's mass expulsion of Indian citizens
Source: INM. 16 October 2019. Comunicado No.59/2019

I. Introduction

1 On October 16, 2019, Mexico's migration law enforcement agency, *Instituto Nacional de Migración* (henceforth referred to as INM), deported 311 Indian citizens on a charter flight. Contrary to the global approach of secrecy and concealment about mass deportations, an official communiqué issued by Mexican migration authorities, as well as a visual narrative on the INM's Twitter account, announced this mass expulsion (INM, 2019). This, as the INM's communiqué triumphantly affirms, was a ground-breaking event: "there is no precedent in the history of the INM - neither in the form, nor in the number of people - of a transatlantic air transfer, *conducción aérea trasatlantica*, like the one carried out that day" (INM, 2019).

The expulsion was framed as law-abiding and human rights-compliant

The announcement praised the communication and coordination with the Embassy of India, and the bureaucratic and logistical capabilities of the INM. Further, despite the fact that official migratory resolutions were deportations, the expulsion was identified as repatriations, a euphemism commonly used for Assisted Voluntary Returns (here referred as Voluntary Deportations). The INM's communiqué concludes by reiterating the INM "commitment to maintaining a safe, orderly, and regular migration" (INM, 2019) and, thus, implicitly singling out migrants as responsible for their own detention and deportation. Although this deliberate visibilisation could be framed as an exercise of democratic transparency and accountability, I argue that it is rather a tactic that accounts for and responds to the geopolitics of migration control in the U.S.-Mexico migration corridor and should, therefore, be carefully dissected. In order to do so I propose, inspired by dramaturgical sociology, to consider the oriented and crafted visibility of bordering practices as dramatic performances; impression-management productions through which

migration control agencies guide perception by constructing a legitimising narrative, presenting their logistical efficiency, and arguing the effectiveness of the overall control regime, while, as in a play, they conceal the actors, dynamic, and processes behind-the-scenes.

This paper focuses on the staging and performance of expulsion and offers an insight into the bureaucratic and operational dimension of the Mexican Transit Control Regime (henceforth referred to as MTRC), an aspect that, compared to the numerous studies on its direct and indirect implications for migrants (Brigden, 2018; París Pombo, 2017; Ruiz, 2001), has been considerably less analysed, thus adding to the research agenda on so-called transit states (Bialasiewicz, 2012; Frowd, 2020; Winters & Mora Izaguirre, 2019). Also, by examining this case, I underscore the profound interconnectedness of Mexican migration enforcement with US border strategy, contributing to the body of work studying the dissemination of US border control through the Americas, and also providing a new understanding of the deterritorialisation and instrumentalisation of deportation practices (FitzGerald, 2020; Hiemstra, 2019; Menjívar, 2014).

1. The exception that proves the rule

2 This unusual case represents an atypical procedure in Mexico's governmentality of migration and, yet, can be framed as the exception that proves the rule. For over 20 years now, Mexico has enforced a Regime of Transit Control to intercept, detain, and deter migration towards the United States (Campos-Delgado, 2018b). This enforcement is as an extension of US bordering policies and carceral geographies that has, in practice, transformed the entire Mexican territory as "borderzone" where migrants' rights are nullified, and their mobility is suppressed (Médecins Sans Frontières, 2017). Although, since its inception in 2001, the regime has been highly focused on intercepting and deterring Central American migrants (803,803 interceptions from 2014 to 2019), in recent years, the migration corridor through Mexico to the United States has also been increasingly transited by migrants of other nationalities, such as migrants from the Caribbean Islands, Asia, and Africa; which is reflected in the increase in interceptions by Mexican migration authorities, going from 7,435 interceptions in 2014 to 27,638 in 2019 (Unidad de Política Migratoria, 2019). However, although the substantial difference in the number of interceptions is related to the composition of the flow, central characteristic of the regime is its differentiated enforcement depending on the migrants' nationality.

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Whereas interception means almost automatically expulsion for Central American migrants, for migrants of other nationalities, especially the so-called extracontinental migrants, this is not the case (Campos-Delgado, 2021b). The basis behind this differential enforcement is that the regime's bureaucratic and logistical machinery is well articulated to expel Central American populations. This machinery consists of: (i) international agreements of return and repatriation, (ii) multiple consular representation offices throughout the country, (iii) short-term detention centres, and (iv) mass land deportations. On the contrary, the bureaucratic, logistical, and financial endeavours involved in the expulsion of other nationalities are arranged on a case-by-case basis. Hence, as I argue elsewhere (Campos-Delgado, 2021b), in the light of the change in the migration flows, the regime has adapted and transformed its mechanisms and practices of bordering using exemption of expulsion to be able to maintain its focus on intercepting, detaining, and expelling Central American migrants. In this paper I claim that, considering that the 311 migrants deported on October 16 accounted for 10 per cent of all

Indian citizens intercepted by Mexican authorities during 2019, this expulsion, while atypical and ground-breaking in its form, is evidence of Mexico's bordering through exemption and the instrumentalisation of discretionary migration enforcement as it suits the regime.

2. Oriented and crafted visibility of bordering practices

3 This transcontinental expulsion was also exceptional in that it was a mediatised border performance. That is, while states commonly enforce deportations in a secret and hidden manner and exposés are usually made by citizens, organised civil society, and/or journalists (BiD, 2021; Rosenberger et al., 2018), this visibility was done on purpose. Thus, in order to question the governmentality of migration, it is necessary to question both what is concealed and what is deliberately revealed. "Visibility in the government of migration", Martina Tazzioli and William Walters write, "is not simply a tool for enforcing border controls; rather, it contributes to structure a field of governmentality making migration movements manageable, and it is currently one of the main forms of knowledge that sustain migration governmentality" (2016: 454). For instance, in states' migrant-information campaigns the visualisation and normalization of a militarised borderscape is intended to affect migrant decision-making and discipline migrants aspirations (Pagogna & Sakdapolrak, 2021; Williams, 2020). Likewise, as James P. Walsh's (2015) research shows, social media is used by migration enforcement agencies with operational and symbolic objectives, as an information-sharing mechanism and, ultimately, as an impression management tool. Thus, just like in a theatrical production, states accentuate certain matters while concealing others to manage and guide the perception of an issue, so I propose to examine the oriented and crafted visibility of bordering practices as dramatic performances. While the theatricality of borders and border control has been examined before (Amilhat-Szary, 2012; Amoore & Hall, 2010; Andreas, 2001; De Genova, 2002; Jones, 2014; Reed-Sandoval, 2015), I get inspiration from the dramaturgical sociological approach to scrutinise the frontstage and backstage aspects on the performance of border control, and to examine what is constructed as visible and knowable and what is intended to remain concealed in border control enforcement.

Scrutinise the frontstage and backstage aspects on the performance of border control

Dramaturgy, through its emphasis on meaning-making and expressiveness in human action (Edgley, 2003, 2013), focuses on what emerges within the field of attention and what remains disguised, and, thus, is a useful framework to unravel the politics and technologies of visibility in migration control. Kenneth Burke's famous statement: "Every way of seeing is also a way of not seeing" (1977: 49) encapsulates a critical remark on "the politics of the perceptible and the imperceptible" (Lepecki & Banes, 2006: 2). Yet, the invisible, Maurice Merleau-Ponty underscores, "is not the contradictory of the visible […] the in-visible is the secret counterpart of the visible […] to comprehend fully the visible relations one must go unto the relation of the visible with the invisible" (1968: 216).

Nevertheless, it is not only that the perceptible and the imperceptible, the invisible and the visible, are intrinsic, but also that in the politics and technologies of visibility, deception is crucial for what Goffman calls "the arts of impression management" (1959: 203). After all, as Burke stresses (1945: 59), every *selection* of a reality is a *deflection* of reality. Hence, a study of migration control and border enforcement inspired by dramaturgy's emphasis on frontstage, backstage, and impression management offers a novel way to address issues related to operative and logistical aspects of bordering as well as enforcement agencies' legitimation narratives.

II. Addressing Backstage dynamics

4 It is in the backstage, Goffman maintains, "that the capacity of a performance to express something beyond itself may be painstakingly fabricated; it is there that the illusions and impressions are openly construed" (1959: 114).

Explore government practices that are usually out of the public eye

Therefore, to access and delve into the backstage dynamics of the MTCR, Freedom of Information (FoI) requests were used as a method of enquiry and data gathering. Since it aims to explore government practices that are usually out of the public eye and question the rationale behind them, this approach is fundamentally critical and disruptive of the government theatricality in which the performances' scripts remain unknown for the audience. Thus, as Kevin Walby and Alex Luscombe underscore, "FoI not only helps researchers better understand the processual and organisational dynamics of public bodies, it also allows academics, as active citizens, to help hold those in positions of power accountable for their actions" (2018: 11).

FoI requests, as Keen enthusiastically stresses, "offers the possibility of unparalleled access to the working of one of our most pervasive and influential formal organisations, the federal government" (1992: 46). Nevertheless, although it has proven to be a powerful tool in social science research and particularly in policing and security research (Belcher & Martin, 2019; Walby & Luscombe, 2020), this method is not "a yellow brick road to knowing about how government 'really works'" (Walby & Luscombe, 2019: 34). There are multiple methodological challenges faced when trying to use it systematically, such as partial, illegible, and/or incomplete data (Bows, 2019; Roberts, 1998), and un/intentional obfuscations that delay and complicate the data gathering and analysis. These disruptions and attempts to regulate and censor the information aim to maintain control over what is perceived; after all, "failure to regulate the information acquired by the audience involves possible disruption of the projected definition of the situation" (Goffman, 1959: 74). However, as Oliver Belcher and Lauren Martin highlight, denial, deferral, and selective disclosure "offer insights to the understanding of the production of security, state power, and knowledge" (2019: 34).

5 I draw on information obtained through FoI requests to the INM. The information obtained is considered official and accurate. The analysis here developed is based on requests made on administrative and operational aspects surrounding the mass deportation of 311 Indian nationals on October 16, 2019, complemented by data from a database of migrants apprehended by Mexican authorities and their migratory resolutions between 2010 and 2019. In particular, on this mass deportation, a total of 11 requests were submitted, and a snowball strategy was applied, i.e., initial "leads" to request information were taken from the INM's communiqué and then the level of detail was increased as subsequent requests were based on INM's responses on the subject. To distinguish intentionally disclosed public information from information obtained through FoI, the former is referred to as INM and the latter as INM-FoI. The information obtained sheds light on the "strategic secrets" (Goffman, 1959: 141) as well as on the backstage manoeuvring and financial arrangements of this mass deportation.

III. Mexican bordering theatricality

6 On October 16 2019, the Mexican State, through its migration enforcement agency, the INM,

deported 311 Indian nationals (310 males and one female) by charter flight. The Wamos Air Boeing 747 aircraft departed at 21:50 from Toluca International Airport and arrived in New Delhi the next day at 20:30, local time (INM, 2019). In the following sections I will explore the scene and geopolitical context, the performers, backstage manoeuvring, and the transportation assemblage that operated around this expulsion. I consider the purpose of this expulsion in the context of the MTCR's migration control agenda, and, finally, I highlight how the visual narratives crafted by the Mexican authorities to publicise and legitimise this expulsion also show the invisibilisation of migrants and care-control dynamics in the regime.

1. Externalisation and Reverberation

7 Mexican authorities framed this expulsion as a sovereign power response to migrants "who did not have a regular status of stay in the country" (INM, 2019) and, while this is accurate, this framing conceals the crucial fact that the migratory destination of these migrants was not Mexico, but the United States. So, the long-standing reverberation of the US border and migration control agenda on Mexico's migration control policy and policing is the scene and geopolitical context for this event.

Reverberation of the US border and migration control agenda on Mexico's migration control

The MTCR aims to stop and deter migrants in transit to the United States (Campos-Delgado, 2018b, 2021a). It was officially launched in June 2001 through the Plan of Action for Cooperation on Border Safety between Mexico and the US (US Department of State, 2001). Since that moment, it has been reinforced through bilateral agreements and US-led initiatives, such as the Merida Initiative, through which Mexico has received material contributions and training. Thus, it is the materialisation of what Nancy Hiemstra calls "the elasticisation of the US southern border" (2019: 54), an assemblage through which the US has reterritorialised and dispersed its border policing activities.

The MTCR has been rationalised by the logic of co-bordering and a "diplomacy of *bon voisinage*" (Henrikson, 2000). Nevertheless, under the façade of the equal partnership lies the power asymmetry between Mexico and the US. The collaborative US-Mexican effort for border enforcement and migration control, as Matthew Longo sharply explains, "frequently appear to be US-driven policies into which Mexico is bullied to participate" (2016: 200). Hence, although temporarily the direct background of the act is the US President Trump's threats[1] and the acquiescent response of the Mexican authorities to further securitise and militarise the migration route, we cannot see Trump's coercive approach as atypical but as intrinsic to the regime. This backstage element was accidentally revealed through Trump's awkward staging and "decorum", which performed almost as a "discrepant role" (Goffman, 1959: 145) in exposing the concealed nature of this securitisation alliance.

2. Air deportation to India: sporadic but not unusual

8 Like other states (Khosravi, 2009; Kleist, 2020; Walters, 2016; Weissman et al., 2020), air deportation has been used before in Mexico's logistics of forced removal. However, due to its focus on interception-detention-expulsion of Central American migrants in transit to the United

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[1] In June 2019, threatened to impose tariffs of 5 percent on all Mexican products, rising to 25 percent, if Mexico did not control the flow of irregular migrant through its territory.

States, the Mexican deportation infrastructure has been mainly terrestrial, and air deportations have been enforced through commercial planes (Campos-Delgado, 2018a).

Nevertheless, while this particular expulsion (because of its form, magnitude, and purpose) is unprecedented in Mexico's governmentality of migration, chronological analysis of the air deportations enforced by Mexican authorities upon Indian nationals during 2019 shows that, although sporadic, air deportation is not unusual (Image 1). During the second half of the year, excluding the mass deportation, Mexican authorities travelled to India 15 times to deport a total of 52 non-citizens; half of these journeys were to deport one person and just twice to deport more than five people (INM-FoI, 2021).
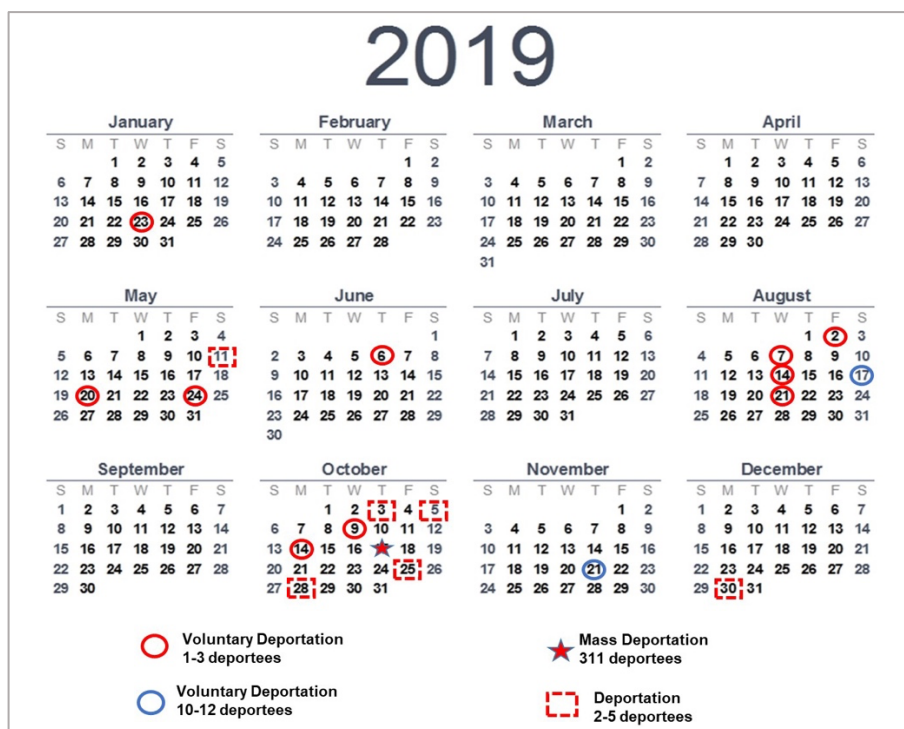

Image 1. Timetabling deportations. Campos-Delgado, 2021. Source: INM-FoI, 2021

9 However, even though this act involved a higher number of deportees than previously seen in transatlantic deportations from Mexico, I claim that the magnitude of this act is not numerical but figurative and, thus, embodies the dramaturgical discrepancy between appearance and actual activity (Burke, 1977; Goffman, 1959).

The magnitude of this act is not numerical but figurative

From 2016 to 2019, out of the 14,195 Indian non-citizens intercepted, Mexican authorities expelled 543, either by deportation or voluntary deportation; in particular, the 311 migrants deported through this act represented 10 per cent of all Indian nationals intercepted during 2019 (INM-FoI, 2020). In practice, it is consistent with the governmentality of extracontinental migration in the MTCR. *Bordering through exemption*, as I have argued elsewhere (Campos-Delgado, 2021b), is the main mechanism for bordering and ordering extracontinental migration in transit through Mexico in which, through various mechanisms, authorities exempts migrants from expulsion. That is, a close analysis of this mass expulsion helps to unveil how common the exceptional arrangements in the MTCR are. For instance, in 2019, out of the 3112 Indian

nationals (3045 males and 67 females) apprehended by Mexican authorities, 587 migrants were released from detention through the *self-deportation* scheme (INM-FoI, 2020). This scheme means that, either through the granting of a so-called Free Transit Agreement or the issuance of a Definitive Departure resolution, migrants are released from detention and must leave Mexico by their own means, that is, they can transit freely in the country as long as they are move towards a border, which usually is the US-Mexico border. Moreover, these data also help to shed light on the instrumentalisation of border practices for the convenience of the regime. This expulsion and its deliberate visibility, as we shall see in the section on purpose, was not only convenient for the regime but was a geopolitical statement.

3. The performers

10 This "final act", to echo the work of Deborah M. Weissman and her colleagues (2020), was performed by 40 border officers, *agentes federales de migración*, 31 agents of the newly formed Nacional Guard, *Guardia Nacional,* as well as two mid-level officials who participated as representatives of the agency (INM, 2019).

The involvement of the National Guard[2] agents made it a militarised act.

Also, agents of the Federal Protection Service of the Mexican Secretariat of Security and Civilian Protection participated as "service personnel" (Goffman, 1959: 117), ensuring that the event proceeded without interruptions, in this context, the movement of detainees from the detention facility where migrants were congregated to the airport where the charter flight departed. Yet, despite the presence of this military force and the consequent implications in handling extraordinary situations, it is crucial to underline that, although generally in this type of ad hoc flights deportees are usually outnumbered by migration and security officials (Walters, 2018: 2804), this was not the case on this act because, perhaps, of the INM's scarce workforce (Carte, 2017).

11 Looking at this expulsion through the lenses of dramaturgical sociology also help us to shed light on roles and practices that, while crucial for performing deportations, are not in the frontstage and, thus, normally overlooked. This is the case of the "service specialists" (Goffman, 1959: 152), workers who specialise in the construction, repair, and maintenance of the show. For border enforcement, these "specialists" are the borderworkers who constructed and managed the deportation from its administrative angle; that is, the INM's bureaucratic workforce that managed the budget and the contracting of services, but also constructed the "paper deportation", i.e. the documentation of each deportee, and liaised with the Indian Embassy staff in Mexico, who certified the nationalities of the deportees. Thus, while embassies and consulates have a diplomatic mission and are geared towards providing assistance and support to their nationals in the foreign country, they are also part of a *diplomacy of deportation* in which, through the provision of identity documentation, they play a crucial role within the deportation machinery - after all, according to the law, neither deportation nor assisted return can be enforced if migrants are not properly identified by their consulate.

4. Backstage manoeuvres

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[2] *Guardia Nacional* is a gendarmerie with national police functions that has been highly involved in the policing of migration law (Ortega Ramírez & Morales Gámez, 2021).

12 Besides this diplomacy of deportation, prior to the expulsion, other backstage manoeuvres were executed to make possible the departure of the deportation convoy from Veracruz' Acayucan facility to Toluca International Airport. As avowed by the INM's communiqué, the deportees "were presented to the migration authorities in the states of Oaxaca, Baja California, Veracruz, Chiapas, Sonora, Mexico City, Durango and Tabasco" (INM, 2019). Hence, the first backstage operation realised to perform this act was the forced mobility of migrants within the country. In particular, migrants were transferred from eight Immigration Removal Centres, *Estancias Migratorias*, and five Temporary Removal Centres, *Estancias Provisionales*, across seven states to the Acayucan detention facility (Image 2). These intra-detention movements of detainees, as research shows (Gill, 2009; Hiemstra, 2013), are not uncommon in migration management and have a disciplinary and distancing purpose.
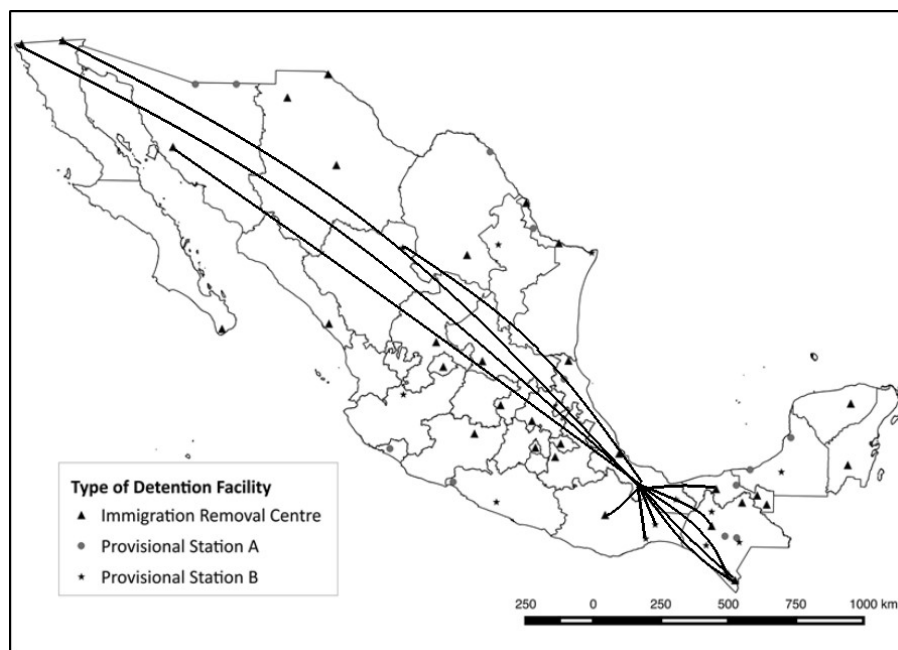

Image 2. Migrants' forced mobility within the country before the deportation. Campos-Delgado, 2021. Source: INM-FoI, 2021.

13 Additionally, alongside this coerced mobility was the "forced waiting" (Tazzioli 2018; McNevin and Missbach 2018). While during 2019, Indian nationals intercepted by Mexican authorities remained detained an average of 17 days, the 311 migrants mass deported were detained longer (Image 3). Hence, this deportation can be described using Ethan Blue's acute words: "a concatenation of jarring dislocations of coerced mobilities and forced stabilities" (2015: 188).

While they were bureaucratically rendered as deportable, these migrants languished in detention centres

Mexican migrant detention centres are prison-like facilities with serious infrastructural deficiencies and limited human and material resources (CNDH, 2019; Campos-Delgado, 2021a). Therefore, although these periods do not contradict the stipulated on the Mexican Migration Law[3], these numbers show that migrants received the double punishment of being deported and

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[3] According to the Article 111 of the Migration Law, migrants cannot be held in detention longer than 60 working days otherwise they need to be released to be regularised.

remain longer enduring abysmal conditions while in detention. Thus, while the INM's communiqués praised the temporal governance of this deportation[4], this other temporality was concealed.
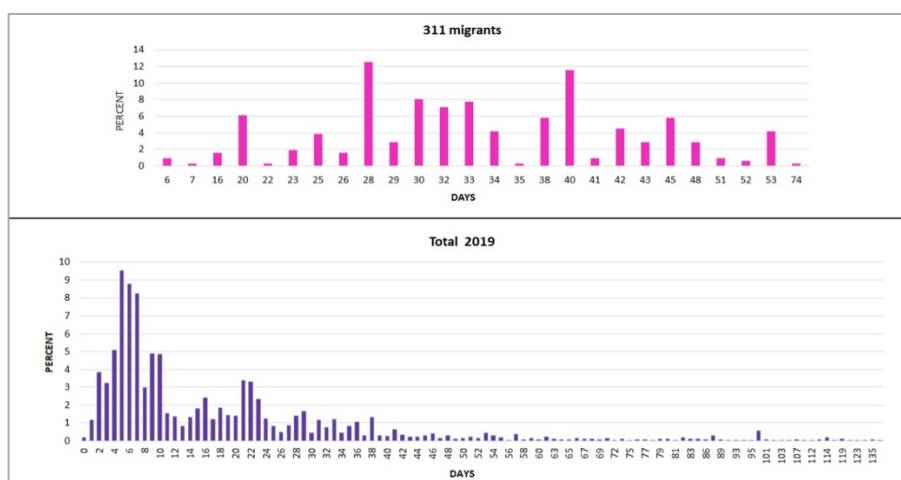

Image 3. The temporality of control: days of detention. Campos-Delgado, 2021. Source: INM-FoI, 2021.

14 The second key backstage manoeuvre was border agents' temporary additional posting. Despite the sizeable military force that joined in this expulsion, it was not a military-led bordering enforcement. Border agents were in charge of the stage management since, according to Article 20 of the Mexican Migration Law, they are the only ones with the power to enforce migration policy. However, an action like this required a workforce that is not available in a single region; thus, agents were summoned throughout the country to Acayucan, Veracruz, where the deportees were concentrated (Image 4) and deployed temporarily for the performance of this act (INM -FoI, 2021).
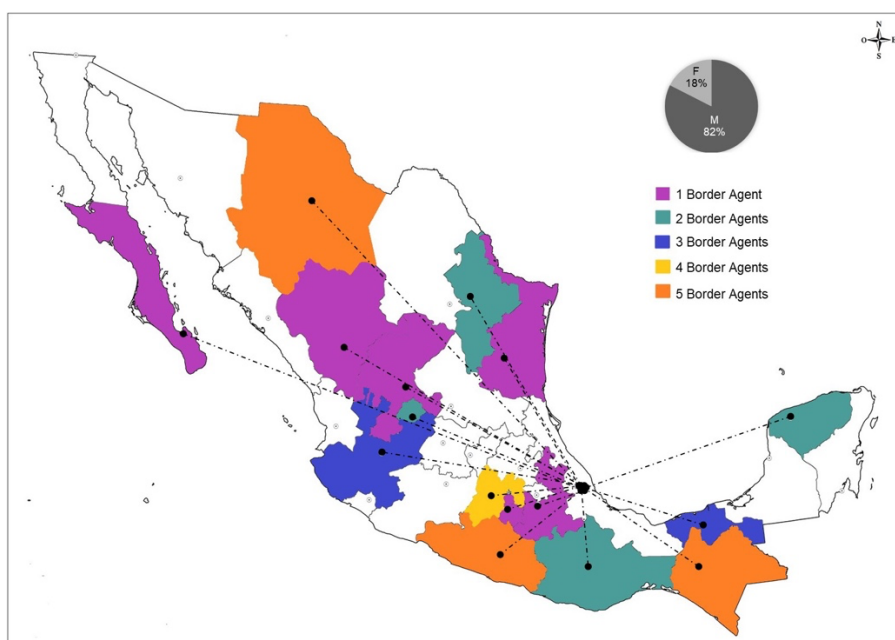

Image 4. Border agents' temporary additional duty. Campos-Delgado, 2021. Source: INM-FoI, 2021.

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[4] Disclosing the exact times of (1) the deportation convoy's departure from the Acayucan detention facility, (2) the arrival at Toluca International Airport, (3) the departure of the charter flight to New Delhi, and (4) the arrival at the "destination".

5. The transportation assemblage

15 A transportation assemblage was formed to enforce this expulsion: 14 coaches and a Boeing 747 plane, as well as the Security and Civilian Protection's patrols and an ambulance that escorted the transit between the detention facility and the airport. The *deportation convoy* made a 10-hour journey from the Acayucan's detention facility to the Toluca airport. Coercive mobility aboard a deportation vehicle, as Ethan Blue underlines is "characterized by geographic travel, bodily immobility and relative temporal fixity" (2015: 181).

The "deportation convoy" consisted of coaches, an ambulance, and security patrols

Vehicles, following William Walters' viapolitics perspective (2016: 436), are "not as mere ephemera but rather material and symbolic elements in topologies of power". In this sense, the fact that the *deportation convoy* consisted of coaches, an ambulance, and security patrols underlines a care-control logic and the enforcement of the "military-humanitarian border" (Tazzioli, 2015) in Mexican territory.

Examination of the transportation assemblage also is helpful to draw another aspect of what is perceptible and yet unseen in migration control, i.e., the financial arrangements. Although, in an effort to show logistical efficiency and effectiveness, this assemblage was specified in the INM's official communications, the cost of these services was conveniently elided in official communications. However, scrutinising this event as a theatrical piece also invites us to examine its budgeting and, thus, what Andersson (2018) frames as the "bioeconomy" of migration control in which forced migrant im/mobility becomes a source of economic profit.

The 14 coaches were rented from the Mexican company ETN Turistar Lujo SA de CV. According to information provided by the INM, each of the coaches transited 8,393 km[5]; each km was priced at MX$ 34.44, giving a total of MX$ 4,042,068.8 (INM-FoI, 2021). Regarding the aircraft, the Mexican government paid MX$ 20,493,441.41 for the rental of the Boeing 747 plane to the Spanish airline company Wamos Air (INM-FoI, 2020), which specialises in charter flights and in December 2020 also carried out a mass deportation flight from the UK to Pakistan (Corporate Watch, 2021).

16 When adding land and air service contracts, the average cost of transportation per deportee was MX$ 78,892.36. While research around the political economy of migration control has shown that border enforcement is outrageously expensive and that multiple industries depend and capitalise on it (Andersson, 2018; Doty & Wheatley, 2013; Weissman et al., 2020), in this case, besides of course the moral dilemmas embedded, this figure becomes even more outrageous when related to Mexico's steadily shrinking education and health care budgets, for instance, during 2019, the per capita spending on basic education in the country was MX$ 21,508 per pupil (CEFP, 2019: 11).

Furthermore, a financial arrangement that often goes unnoticed in the deportation machinery is agents' travel allowances and its deferred payment. For this particular expulsion, MX$

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[5] The total kilometres transited per coach is striking because the approximated distance between Acayucan, Veracruz, and Toluca airport is 600 kilometres. Yet, it is noteworthy, this information was re-confirmed by a follow up FoI (INM-FoI, 2021). As mentioned before, the information obtained from the INM through FoI is considered official and accurate.

414,188.24 were spent on travel allowances for the two representatives of INM and the 40 border agents to cover meals as well as accommodation in New Delhi (INM-FoI, 2021).

The participation of agents in removals is framed within a reward-sanctions system

It is noteworthy that in the MTCR this, as well as other migration enforcement actions, are not exclusively carried out by frontline agents, but also by other borderworkers whose job functions are not related to the direct handling of migrants; hence, in the daily operation of the regime, the participation of agents in removals is framed within a reward-sanctions system. For example, participation in a land removal to Central America is considered a sanctioning mechanism, or at least an unappealing activity to participate in, as it involves non-stop coach journeys that last from nine up to 36 hours (Project Counselling Service, 2015: 10), and in which usually after "handing over" deportees to local authorities they have to return the same day on the same transport. Yet, the international expulsions, particularly the transatlantic ones, are considered to be a "reward" for outstanding job performances[6].

6. Purpose: warning and reaffirmation

17 Deportation, it is about sending the message, not only to those expelled but also to those who have not yet travelled, that they are not welcome (Collyer, 2012; De Genova, 2002). For the Mexican government, as stated in an official communiqué, the 311 expelled migrants were messengers of its migration policy: "The Indian nationals returned to their country in the best possible conditions, so that they can take back to their homeland the message that Mexico welcomes regular migrants" (INM, 2019). Moreover, when asked to comment on this deportation during a commemorative event for the 26th anniversary of the INM, Francisco Garduño, the INM Director, declared: "That is a warning for all transcontinental migration that even if they are from Mars, we are going to send them back, to India, to Cameroon, to Africa". Indeed, as bluntly framed by Garduño, this was an act of warning.

Furthermore, if we want to delve into the "grammar of motives" (Burke, 1945: xvi), we must pay attention to the grammatical resources and the interpretive framework used to convey to the audience. So, the use of the "Mars" metaphor by Garduño is crucial for understanding perspective-taking and meaning-making in the MTCR. Metaphors, Joel Sati writes, "shape how we think about policy", and the alien-migrant metaphor "makes it easier to conceive of immigrants as foreign and nonhuman, contributing to their place outside the polity" (2020: 26). Hence, even though, following strong criticism from organised civil society, he apologised, it is possible to read this reference as a "give off" expression (Goffman, 1959: 14) that showed a racist and xenophobic tone and underlined a long-established "othering" approach in Mexico's migration management.

Nevertheless, as Burke's thinking highlights, "motives are rhetorical appeals which seek to persuade either an internal or external audience" (Overington, 1977: 134). Thus, although the message was apparently aimed only at irregular migrants as an external audience, the message was also aimed at the "northern partners" who are an internal audience.

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[6] Nevertheless, since travel expenses are reimbursed, the ability to wait for reimbursement of significant expenses filters which agents can be selected for such missions.

The purpose was to reaffirm the importance and utility of Mexico's partnership and the MTCR at large

According to the US Border Patrol, the number of Indian nationals intercepted at the US Southwest border has risen steadily and spiked in 2018. Indian nationals are, since 2016, the third-largest group of migrants apprehended by US border agents, after Mexicans and Central Americans: Honduras, Guatemala, El Salvador, and Nicaragua (CBP, 2019). These statistics show that the route through Mexico has become a transit for other migrants in addition to Central Americans and that the MTCR has not fulfilled its mandate of firewalling with these other populations by opening a "semi-legal" path of mobility to the US-Mexico border through the *self-deportation* scheme (Image 5). Therefore, this deportation must be framed in the context of the aforementioned externalisation and reverberation of the US border control agenda in Mexico's migration management and, thus, as a symbolic act in which the Mexican authorities sought to exemplify to their "northern partner" the importance of the regime and its potential to intercept, detain, expel, and deter this population and not only the Central American population.
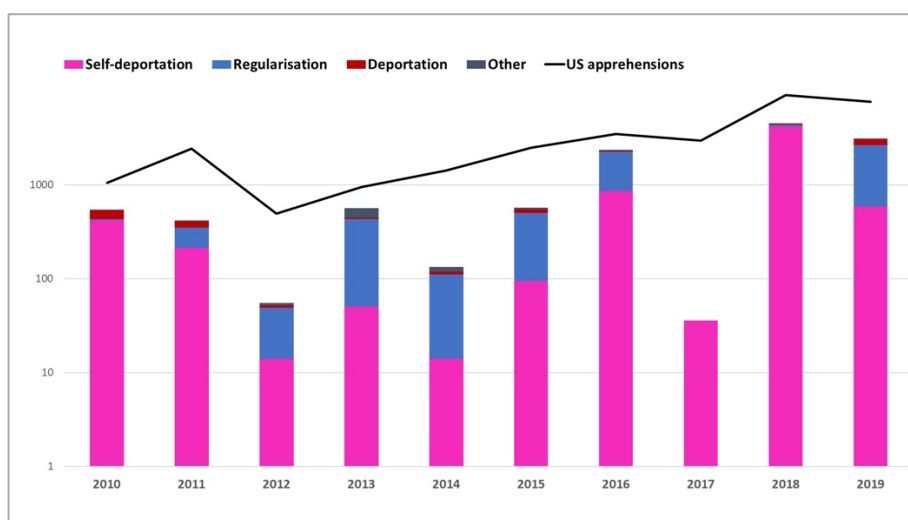

Image 5. Apprehensions of Indian Nationals by Mexican and US authorities (2010-2019). Campos-Delgado, 2021. Source: CBP, 2019 & Unidad de Política Migratoria, 2019.

7. Bordering disclaimers: "media-type visibility"

18 The INM, like other migration enforcement agencies worldwide, disseminates carefully crafted communications aimed at legitimising its bordering policies and practices (Torre Cantalapiedra, 2019), and, as mentioned earlier, this performance was not the exception. After all, "in politics, as in other human venues", Charles Edgley writes, "appearance is everything" (2013: 4).

In addition to the communiqué, which ensured media coverage in national media, the INM created a visual grammar with photos and a video on its social media accounts with the intention to convey its message to a wider audience. In this "media-type visibility" (Brighenti, 2007: 332) the INM constructed a legitimising narrative and presented its logistical efficiency. Hence, all of this could be analysed as a tactic to create an "impression of legitimacy" (Goffman, 1959: 56). While the photos show images taken inside the aircraft and on arrival in New Delhi (Image 6), the 2-minute video, initially posted in the INM's Twitter account and then deleted, recounts the removal operation in Mexico, i.e., the departure from the Acayucan's detention facility and the

arrival at the airport, highlighting mainly the logistical aspect and workforce involved (INM-FoI, 2020).

Image 6. *"INM informa"*. Source: Twitter/ @INAMI_mx

19 The representations showed the "idealisation of control": obedient migrants confined to their coach seats or walking towards the aircraft, all under the gaze of security and migration officials who, as in a dual role of performance and audience, captured those moments on their cell phones. The migrants are represented as part of the scenography, bodies in movement that complied with the rules and the agents' dictates, who did not even interact with each other. The depictions show the energetic body signals of the agents telling the migrants where to go, as well as agents standing side by side so that their own bodies created transit routes that guided deportees to the buses or to the aircraft.

The representations showed the "idealisation of control"

Furthermore, besides these interactions, another "corporeal" dimension of the removal is underscored by INM's acknowledgement of its care-control: "During the journey", the INM states (INM-FoiI, 2019), "the foreigners were provided with food, water, blankets and their belongings were safeguarded at all times", safeguarding being understood as a euphemism to say that migrants' belongings were confiscated during the travel.

This "media-type visibility" (Brighenti, 2007: 332) aimed to produce an account of the INM as a migration agency that is efficient, compliant, and, ultimately, legitimate. Taking into account the ambiguity, secrecy, and opacity surrounding migration enforcement, but especially, deportations and mass deportations (Walters, 2016), the visibility promoted by the INM leads us

to consider this not only as an impression management strategy but also as a "disclaimer" (Hewitt & Stokes, 1975), a way to ensure that this potentially "problematic event" is defined and addressed in a way that does not call into question the legitimacy of the regime. However, the effect of this theatrical visibility was not as expected: the INM was widely criticised by human rights organisations for this event, to the point that the video and some of images posted on social media were removed a few days later, and also inspired the questions about the unseen and unperceived that are developed in this document.

IV. Conclusion

20 Considering the oriented and crafted visibility of bordering practices as dramatic performances offers the possibility to question the politics and technologies of visibility in the governmentality of migration. This analytical lens allows us to examine what is constructed as visible and knowable and what is intended to remain hidden in border control enforcement, that is, to interrogate the public performance and narrative of migration control agencies, and to scrutinise the actors and dynamics that are kept out of public view.

The Mexican government wanted to portray the imaginary of an orderly and efficient, but also powerful, deportation machine

Using this analytical lens, in this paper I have analysed how, by deliberately making visible the mass deportation of 311 Indian nationals, the Mexican government wanted to portray the imaginary of an orderly and efficient, but also powerful, deportation machine that could even deport to "Mars", as the INM Director declared. Yet, this *bordering theatricality* was not only intended to construct a legitimising narrative about the INM's logistical capacity and efficiency, but also about "quality". Conveniently omitting the backstage dynamics here unveiled, the Mexican government portrayed this deportation as one in which foreigners "returned to their country in the best conditions" (INM, 2019), provided with food, water, blankets, and comfy transport. Thus, this performance not only exhibits the power of the Mexican state, reinforces the link between irregularity and deportability, but above all, underpinned by a care-control logic, legitimises future deportations as safe, orderly, and, ultimately, humanitarian.

Acknowledgements

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Notes

1 In June 2019, threatened to impose tariffs of 5 percent on all Mexican products, rising to 25 percent, if Mexico did not control the flow of irregular migrant through its territory.

2 *Guardia Nacional* is a gendarmerie with national police functions that has been highly involved in the policing of migration law (Ortega Ramírez & Morales Gámez, 2021).

3 According to the Article 111 of the Migration Law, migrants cannot be held in detention longer than 60 working days otherwise they need to be released to be regularised.

4 Disclosing the exact times of (1) the deportation convoy's departure from the Acayucan

detention facility, (2) the arrival at Toluca International Airport, (3) the departure of the charter flight to New Delhi, and (4) the arrival at the "destination".

5 The total kilometres transited per coach is striking because the approximated distance between Acayucan, Veracruz, and Toluca airport is 600 kilometres. Yet, it is noteworthy, this information was re-confirmed by a follow up FoI (INM-FoI, 2021). As mentioned before, the information obtained from the INM through FoI is considered official and accurate.

6 Nevertheless, since travel expenses are reimbursed, the ability to wait for reimbursement of significant expenses filters which agents can be selected for such missions.