**Migrant Caravans: A New Social Movement?**

The picture of the Salvadoran Óscar Ramírez and his daughter, Angie, both lifeless and locked in an embrace, on the banks of Rio Grande (Río Bravo in Mexico) caused alarm and anger around the world. As usual in moments of collective pain, several politicians came out to express their solidarity with the family of the deceased and promise more funds to the United States immigration system.

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Oscar and his family left El Salvador a few months earlier with the plan of reaching Dallas (Texas), joining their relatives, and rebuilding their lives away from the misery and violence that devastate their country. More than 1.35 million Salvadorans live in the US, almost 25% of El Salvador’s population of around 6 million people. Remittances sent by Salvadoran migrants amount to more than 20% of the GDP of the small Central American country.

Salvadoran migration to the United States surged during the bloody civil war that took the lives of more than 75,000 people between 1970 and 1992, when the Chapultepec peace agreements were signed. The popular guerrilla led by the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN) attempted to overthrow a dictatorial regime supported by the American governments of Carter and Reagan. In the year 83, according to [the Philadelphia Enq](http://nl.newsbank.com/nl-search/we/Archives?p_multi=PI%7C&p_product=PHNP&p_theme=phnp&p_action=search&p_maxdocs=200&s_dispstring=Title(HOW+U.S.+ADVISERS+RUN+THE+WAR+IN+EL+SALVADOR)+AND+date(all)&p_field_advanced-0=title&p_text_advanced-0=(%22HOW+U.S.+ADVISERS+RUN+THE+WAR+IN+EL+SALVADOR%22)&xcal_numdocs=20&p_perpage=10&p_sort=YMD_date:D&xcal_useweights=no)[uirer](http://nl.newsbank.com/nl-search/we/Archives?p_multi=PI%7C&p_product=PHNP&p_theme=phnp&p_action=search&p_maxdocs=200&s_dispstring=Title(HOW+U.S.+ADVISERS+RUN+THE+WAR+IN+EL+SALVADOR)+AND+date(all)&p_field_advanced-0=title&p_text_advanced-0=(%22HOW+U.S.+ADVISERS+RUN+THE+WAR+IN+EL+SALVADOR%22)&xcal_numdocs=20&p_perpage=10&p_sort=YMD_date:D&xcal_useweights=no) [1], US advisers sent by President Reagan held key positions in the Salvadoran army, effectively conducting the war against the popular revolt.

Like Oscar, hundreds of thousands of Central American risk their lives daily trying to reach the US and fulfil the “American dream.” From October 2018 to April 2019, according to the [Pew Research Center](https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/06/12/migrant-apprehensions-and-deportations-increase-in-mexico-but-remain-below-recent-highs/) [2], US authorities detained approximatelly 92,000 people on the Mexican-American border. US government agencies, different research institutes, and the mainstream media speak of a crisis on the US Southern border.

The scenes are Dantesque. This year alone, [nearly 210](https://missingmigrants.iom.int/region/americas?region=1422)[3] people lost their lives trying to enter the US, while in 2017 this number reached 211, according to Missing Migrants Projects. Those who survive must endure unhealthy conditions in detention centres where boys and girls are separated from their parents and prisoners are tortured and mistreated. Democratic Representative Alexandra Ocasio-Córtez compared Immigration Detention Centres with Nazi concentration camps, sparking an intense debate in the US. The comparison could not be more appropriate.

Trump uses the migration issue to create confusion and fear among the population and consolidate his electoral base with an eye on the upcoming presidential elections. In different political speeches, the racist, xenophobic US President described immigrants as traffickers, rapists, and kidnappers. He also spoke of an invasion when referring to the migrant caravans that have been departing from different parts of Central America. These caravans are formed by thousands of people; in many cases we see entire families travelling together.

A significant part of the US establishment distanced itself from Trump’s racist statements. However, both Democrats and Republicans accepted the idea of ​​a “crisis on the Southern border.”

If we look at the facts, we will see that the migratory policies of Trump and his predecessor Obama do not differ significantly. The former US president deported about 3 million people between 2009 and 2016. If, on the one hand, Obama legalized a small number of the so-called “dreamers,” on the other, he strengthened the repressive system at the border. The Customs and Border Protection saw its staff grow to nearly 60,000 and its budget exceed US$16 billion, making it the largest US public agency.

Concerning immigration policies, Democrats and Republicans disagree rhetorically, but their policies do not distant much. Both parties advocate for reducing the influx of undocumented people into the country. Whereas Trump talks about building his infamous wall, Democrats lean toward less “blatant” paths such as employing People Tracking technologies and forging agreements with migrant-producing countries.

Besides, both parties know the US needs migrant labour. Both due to population ageing – which results in an increasing demand for a younger workforce – and because migrant labour pushes down the total wage bill of the country, as migrants hold fewer rights and worse salaries.

**Migrant Caravans: A New Phenomenon?**

The Central American migrant caravans are not a whole new phenomenon. We saw something similar in 2015, during the refugee crisis in Europe, described by all as the most significant influx of refugees in Europe since World War II. In that dramatic summer, millions of Syrians, Iraqis, Afghans, and people of many other nationalities entered Europe through Turkey intending to settle in the continent’s most affluent countries. After much contention and disagreement among European leaders, the crisis ended a year later with the signing of an agreement between the European Union (EU) and Turkey, which we will talk about later on.

Caravans also form on the migratory routes that cross the Sahara. The most important one begins in Senegal, crosses the desert to Libya, continuing by sea to Lampedusa, where migrants risk their lives in precarious boats, known in Spanish as "pateras." In his book "Bilal," the Italian journalist Fabrizio Gatti superbly portrayed this journey. Also, the arrest of Carola Rackete, captain of the *Sea Watch 3*, ordered by the Italian interior minister Matteo Salvini, shows that the migratory crisis in the Mediterranean is far from over.

Migration is a collective phenomenon. Deep-seated social problems affecting millions of people - such as poverty, unemployment, environmental tragedies, and wars - drive millions of people to move to another country. It cannot be strictly seen as a personal decision.

In Central America, migrant caravans are another product of the brutal social crisis hitting countries like Honduras, Guatemala and El Salvador for decades. Poverty, unemployment, and hunger force large numbers of people to undertake the long journey of more than three thousand kilometres in infra-human conditions. They face all kinds of climatic, geographical and social obstacles.

Among other factors, this social catastrophe is related to decades of US meddling in Central American affairs, as well as to various murderous dictatorships that ruled the countries of the region. Nearly all of these military governments received support from Washington. Somoza's dictatorship in Nicaragua and the previously mentioned Salvadoran regime are just two examples of it.

Moreover, years of neo-liberal policies and free trade agreements with the United States contributed further to worsen the socio-economic situation in the region. In many cases, the Central American governments that carried out the neo-liberal agenda call themselves leftist and progressive. This is the case with the past two FMLN administrations in El Salvador, which ruled the country between 2009 and 2019, and with Daniel Ortega in Nicaragua. A complete understanding of the current migration wave is not possible without seeing this broader context.

On the other hand, Central America is experiencing a sustained wave of mass struggles that have endured for many years. The Nicaraguan people, for example, staged a popular rebellion against the Sandinista government of Daniel Ortega, a dictatorship disguised as progressive and supported by different left-wing parties around the world. Honduras is currently experiencing a similar process, with massive mobilizations throughout the country against President Juan Orlando Hernández.

Migrant caravans are part of the resistance against social regression. Many see in them a way to overcome the harassment of mafias, criminal gangs, and police repression they suffer in their countries and also in Mexico.

**Trump and AMLO Repress Migrants**

Both Trump in the US and Andrés Manuel López Obrador (AMLO) in Mexico respond to the migrant caravans with repressive policies. Trump does it openly, bluntly, attacking migrants as if they were criminals, traffickers, rapists, and vagabonds. The racist US president deployed troops to the border, closed it partially with razor wire and strengthened immigration laws. His goal is clear. On the one hand, to reduce the number of refugees entering the US. On the other, as stated above, to benefit from this issue during next year's presidential elections.

The President of Mexico, in turn, employs a different tone but implements a similar policy. AMLO frames the issue as a humanitarian crisis, mentioning the importance of respecting the fundamental rights of migrants and, in some cases, offering them humanitarian visas. Nevertheless, like Trump, he sent troops to the border with Guatemala to prevent the entry of migrants into his country. Migrants and NGOs report daily abuses committed by Mexican authorities against migrants. According to a humanitarian worker quoted by the [Wall Street Journal](https://www.wsj.com/articles/trump-says-he-will-punish-guatemala-for-not-reaching-safe-third-country-agreement-11563887818?mod=searchresults&page=1&pos=1)[3], the situation now is even worse than during the previous government of Enrique Peña Nieto.

The recent agreement between the US and Mexico shows that the two leaders differ little in criminalizing migration. The agreement also reflects the degree of submission of Mexico to the United States. AMLO accepted almost all of Trump's demands, except one, that Central American migrants be required to apply for asylum in the first foreign country they enter, the so-called "safe third country" agreement. This measure would collapse Mexico's migratory system. All the others – sending troops to the border and the "Remain in Mexico"[4] policy – are already being enforced.

The agreement also holds similarities to the one signed in 2016 between the European Union (EU) and Turkey to halt the entry of refugees from the Middle East and Asia into Europe. There is one significant difference, though. Whereas in the first case the agreement was signed after Trump blackmailed Mexico with imposing tariffs, the second was reached in a friendlier "environment," with Europe offering a large sum of money (6 billion euros) to Turkish President Erdogan.

The two agreements, however, have the same goal, halt migration and close borders. The Turkish coastguard, funded in part with EU funds, detains the boats carrying refugees to the Greek coast, bring them back to Turkey and violently repress those who refuse to obey. It is the same repression experienced by Central Americans in Mexico and sub-Saharans in North Africa. As in the case of Mexico, different NGOs denounce not only the violence used by the Turkish coastguard but also the deplorable conditions in which some Syrian refugees live in Turkey.

**Migrating Is not a Crime**

More and more people are forced to leave their homeland and seek a better life in a foreign country. The number of migrants in the world has not ceased to grow. They surpassed [258 million people in 2017](https://www.un.org/en/sections/issues-depth/migration/index.html), 40% more than in 2000, according to the United Nations[6]. Migrating is not a crime, as Trump, Salvini, and many others publicly declare.

The right to migrate to flee political persecution – but also to escape hunger and misery – must cease to be a dead letter in international treaties. Migrants are not delinquents. In principle, everyone who reaches the US Southern border and wishes to live and work in that country should be able to do so. It is the only way to prevent deaths such as Oscar´s and Angie´s from happening again.

Notes:

[[1]](https://litci.org/pt/Downloads/%5B1%5D) http://nl.newsbank.com/nl-search/we/Archives?p\_multi=PI%7C&p\_product=PHNP&p\_theme=phnp&p\_action=search&p\_maxdocs=200&s\_dispstring=Title(HOW+U.S.+ADVISERS+RUN+THE+WAR+IN+EL+SALVADOR)+AND+date(all)&p\_field\_advanced-0=title&p\_text\_advanced-0=(%22HOW+U.S.+ADVISERS+RUN+THE+WAR+IN+EL+SALVADOR%22)&xcal\_numdocs=20&p\_perpage=10&p\_sort=YMD\_date:D&xcal\_useweights=no

[[2]](https://litci.org/es/menu/opresiones/inmigrantes/caravanas-migrantes-nuevo-movimiento-social/#_ftnref2) https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/06/12/migrant-apprehensions-and-deportations-increase-in-mexico-but-remain-below-recent-highs/

[3] https://missingmigrants.iom.int/region/americas?region=1422

[4] https://www.wsj.com/articles/trump-says-he-will-punish-guatemala-for-not-reaching-safe-third-country-agreement-11563887818?mod=searchresults&page=1&pos=1

[5] This policy obliges asylum seekers to wait in Mexico while U.S. courts analyse their requests

[6] https://www.un.org/en/sections/issues-depth/migration/index.html