

## **Bought “Papers”: Unorthodox Procedures Implemented by Guatemalans to Acquire Mexican Personal Identification Documents**

### **“Papeles” comprados: procedimientos no ortodoxos implementados por guatemaltecos para adquirir documentos mexicanos de identificación personal**

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#### ABSTRACT

This article analyzes a series of extralegal procedures implemented by Guatemalans to acquire Mexican personal identification documents. The research focuses on the experiences of descendants of families who took refuge in Mexico during the 1980s and 1990s and returned to Guatemala between 1994 and 1996. These young people, born in Guatemala after their parents returned to their country of origin, employed the practice of buying Mexican birth certificates which were later used to enter Mexico legally. The fieldwork was carried out in two Guatemalan villages, as well as two Mexican ones, located in Cancun and Playa del Carmen. The main argument is that for them Mexican identification documents become a singular force that confers recognition and offers them the possibility to be incorporated into governmental logic which grants material benefits. Such forms of political imagination are related to the experiences of multiple documentation accumulated by older generations during their refuge period and are now encouraged by the Mexican State’s new border security strategy.

*Keywords:* 1. personal identification documents, 2. young people, 3. political merchandise, 4. Riviera Maya, Mexico, 5. Guatemala.

#### RESUMEN

En este artículo analizo una serie de procedimientos extralegales que implementan algunos migrantes guatemaltecos para adquirir documentos de identificación mexicana. Centro la atención en las experiencias de jóvenes pertenecientes a familias que estuvieron refugiados en México en las décadas de 1980 y 1990 y que regresaron a Guatemala entre 1994 y 1996. Estos jóvenes, nacidos en Guatemala después del que sus padres retornaran a su país de origen, han adoptado la práctica de comprar actas de nacimiento mexicanas que luego emplean para internarse en México legalmente. El trabajo de campo se realizó en dos aldeas guatemaltecas, así como dos mexicanas, ubicadas en Cancún y Playa del Carmen. Argumento que para estas personas los documentos de identificación mexicana les generan una fuerza singular que confiere reconocimiento, y les ofrece la posibilidad de ser incorporados a lógicas gubernamentales que otorgan beneficios materiales. Tales modos de imaginación política están relacionados con las experiencias de múltiple documentación acumuladas por las generaciones mayores durante su periodo de refugio, y son incentivados por la nueva estrategia de segurización fronteriza del Estado mexicano.

*Palabras clave:* 1. documentos de identificación personal, 2. jóvenes, 3. mercancías políticas, 4. Riviera Maya, México, 5. Guatemala.

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## INTRODUCTION

In order to cross a border legally, in addition to carrying an identification document issued by the State from which you come, it is required to obtain a temporary stay permit issued by the immigration authority of the country you wish to enter. Yet, as is known, access to visa systems does not depend only on legal abstraction. To obtain a visa, applicants must prove to the immigration authority of the country they wish to enter that they have the material and linguistic resources that, although not listed in the immigration requirements, condition the course of the procedures.

If we take a look at the experiences of Guatemalans of lower social strata who try to enter Mexico, three situations will be found: that the majority do not meet the requirements set by immigration authorities to enter legally; that legal exclusion does not stop migration, rather simply makes it illegal; and that many people are going to extra-legal instances in order to obtain the documents that they later use to enter, feigning legality.

Being aware that obtaining “Mexican papers,” as popular speech has it, by means other than the ordinary ones, does not always imply transgressions of the public morals of the State, I rather choose to call such procedures “unorthodox practices” for obtaining personal identification documents. Hereby, unorthodox practices describe the broad set of actions, some legal and some illegal, tried with the purpose of obtaining a birth certificate or a voting card, well aware that the path that has been adopted implies the alteration of ordinary procedures. I will show that when dealing with the alteration of the procedures for the issuing of personal identification documents, the first affront to the authority of the State comes from the consent of its own agents to participate in illegal acts, even in the case of Civil Registry officials, municipal authorities that sell certificates, or common land commissariats that agree to issue certificates with altered information.

Following after Eco (1988) and Bubandt (2009), I propose that false documents and the alteration of procedures constitute excellent resources to study “the relationship between empathy, power and authenticity” (Bubandt, 2009, p. 588). This is because its epistemological traits allow us to trace the political formations, the fields of force, and the national and global imaginaries that drive individuals to incur in such practices. Considering the previous formulation, I understand Mexican “papers” obtained by extralegal means as political artifacts framed in a common history and political economy, one in which Mexico and Guatemala acquire the form of self-contained entities, yet at the same time articulated in a hierarchical and unequal manner. A simple way to apprehend such inequalities is by paying attention to how people assess and value the identification documents issued by one or the other State.

In these contrasting evaluations, “papers” emerge as bearing asymmetric value: although the voting card and its Guatemalan counterpart, the Personal Identity Document (DPI, for its acronym in Spanish), fulfill the same legal function, the possibilities for mobility they offer

are asymmetric. While the DPI is insufficient to enter Mexico legally, with the Mexican voting card, and the corresponding immigration permit, it is feasible to enter Guatemalan territory. Thus, the public force of personal identification documents does not depend on their authenticity or falsity, but on their ability to become artifacts of (re)cognition, and on their role in articulating the imagination and political practice of those who carry or crave to carry them (Abarca & Bibler, 2018; Gordillo, 2006; Ordoñez, 2016; Salter, 2003; Statz, 2016; Yeh, 2017).

The practices that will be discussed here are not the only ones that allow obtaining Mexican identification documents by means of fraudulent methods. It is known that “*coyotes*” or “*polleros*” increasingly incorporate apocryphal voting cards as part of the services they offer to those wishing to migrate to the United States; but due to space limitations, this topic will not be analyzed.

I acknowledge that any analytical approach to the world of illegality risks exposing people who have agreed to share aspects of their lives that could be penalized. For this reason, I have been cautious and safeguarded the identity of the protagonists of the research supporting this article: names have been changed and I have omitted the location and names of the Guatemalan towns. Along this clarifying line, I hereby express that the interest in the subject matter does not derive from a concern on possible transgressions to legality and state morality; what I rather seek is to highlight the way in which lack of transparency operates in civil registries, as a process of falsification of the State’s own authority, which in turn opens spaces for the agency of marginalized subjects.

## STUDY LOCATIONS AND NEW MIGRATORY DYNAMICS

The ethnographic material presented here is derived from an investigation carried out in two Guatemalan localities, and in the cities of Cancun and Playa del Carmen, Mexico.<sup>2</sup> As previously stated, I will keep private the names and exact location of the Guatemalan towns to protect the identification of my interlocutors. I will refer to them with the names L1 and L2. Both villages were founded by former refugees who returned from Mexico: L1 in 1994 and L2 in 1996. 220 families settled in L1, while 130 families reached L2. In both villages, the family and personal stories are structured by the collective experiences of the refugees in Mexico and their subsequent return to Guatemala.

Various sources indicate that the number of Guatemalans who took refuge in Mexico escaping from counterinsurgency violence in the period 1978-84 exceeded 36,000. According to the same sources, between 1987 and 1996 just over 24,000 refugees then returned to Guatemala within the framework of the so-called organized and collective return.

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The number of those who chose to apply for naturalization as offered by the Mexican government reached 11,000, that is, 30% (Arriola, 2016; Cárdenas, 2011; Lerma, 2016; Ruíz, 2008, 2013).

Most of the inhabitants of L1 come from camps, ranches and other localities located in Chiapas municipalities bordering the Mountain Communities of Population in Resistance (CPR-Sierra, for its acronym in Spanish), and from camps in Quintana Roo and Campeche. For their part, the inhabitants of L2 arrived from camps in Quintana Roo and Campeche.

L1 and L2 have a series of similarities and contrasts, and acknowledging those will help to understand the context of the research: most of their family networks extend to both sides of the border; a high number of its residents hold dual nationality; transnational labor migration is one of the main ways of earning a living, especially for young people; trips to Mexico to visit relatives, shop, or simply for entertainment are frequent; and, in the regional environment, “returnees” constitute a social category with more or less defined attributes. For many of their neighbors, they are “Mexican,” “they want to appear Mexican,” or “they speak like Mexicans.” In both villages, maintaining and adopting patterns of behavior and personal presentation following “Mexican” stereotypes are resources that prepare individuals for migration. Teenagers, even those who have not traveled to Mexico, know that proper performance in front of immigration authorities can make the difference between staying or continuing the route, and subsequent deportation.

For L1 and L2 youth, as for those from other Guatemalan locations (Piedrasanta, 2019), the Riviera Maya is the main non-agricultural labor migration destination in Mexico. The sun and beach tourism economy in the Riviera Maya accommodates a contingent of unskilled labor that the Guatemalan economy is unable to absorb or expels. Upon arriving in Cancun, or other points in the area, these people merge into the mass of the precarious and flexible proletariat, subject to the ups and downs of the beach tourism industry (Arteaga, 2015, 2017; Bedoya, 2020; Bianet, 2010; Frage, 2012), even so, the jobs that Cancun offers are more appealing than the sporadic work available in their localities of origin. The possibility of having a little money and being in a place wherein leisure and consumption offers are wide, even if they are not accessed, constitute stimuli attractive enough to imagine that life in Cancun or Playa del Carmen is more pleasant than in the Guatemala villages.

A peculiarity of migrants from L1 and L2 is that, in addition to finding better jobs, people move with the intention of making the point of arrival their place of permanent residence (Bedoya, 2020). Although they make Mexico their country of official residence, they keep parental and friendship ties in Guatemala, send financial aid, make periodic visits, and serve as migratory references in the lives of younger brothers, cousins, and neighbors.

Migration to the Riviera Maya from L1 and L3 coexists with a varied series of travel modalities to Mexico and the United States. Matter of fact, as Lerma (2016) documented in his study of the differentiated citizen status of naturalized ex-refugees living in Chiapas,

most of the domestic groups of ex-refugees in Mexico participate in residency strategies based on multiterritoriality, and it is not surprising that some of its members hold double and even triple citizenship. These movements can be characterized as a series of flows and counterflows in different directions and with varied temporalities. Of these, I will highlight three cohorts.

The first corresponds to what Arriola (2016) called “reverse return” and Lerma (2016) called “counter return.” These are returnee families and individuals who returned to Mexico shortly after returning to Guatemala. The second type of movement from the villages of return corresponds to what I define as “return to the country of origin.”

It is a movement led by people who were born in Mexico from refugee parents and who were still children or teenagers when their families returned to Guatemala. Upon reaching adulthood, many of these people returned to Mexico claiming that this is their country of origin. As can be inferred, because they were born in Mexico, they possess Mexican identification documents. This movement differs from “counter return” and “reverse return” as it occurs individually, and those who undertake it usually refer to it as a return without epithets, that is, as a simple “return” to their country of origin. The third type of movement to Mexico from the villages of return falls into the category of ordinary irregular migration, since it is carried out by young people born after the return and who only possess Guatemalan nationality.

Most of the young people who reside or resided in L1 and L2, but who were born in Mexico from refugee parents, hold dual citizenship. That is, they are Guatemalan and Mexican. In these villages, it was common for parents to worry about keeping valid Mexican personal identification documents for their underage children. Likewise, it was common for these young people to travel to Mexico when they reached legal age to obtain their voting card.

Those who were born in Guatemala after the return of their parents, for their part, only possess Guatemalan nationality. As for Guatemalans without family experiences of refuge and return, for them the options for regular entry into Mexico are limited to the Cross-Border Worker Visiting Card. It is they who are most often involved in the purchase of birth certificates.

The last two migratory cohorts described constitute the focus of this study. The emphasis is placed on members of families of former refugees who, due to being born after the return of their parents to Guatemala, only possess Guatemalan nationality and who turn to the illegal market to obtain a birth certificate for the purpose of transiting into or settling in Mexico, pretending to be Mexican by birth.

## UNORTHODOX WAYS TO ACQUIRE MEXICAN “PAPERS”

Several authors have documented how historically the Guatemalan populations residing in the vicinity of the border with Mexico have obtained personal identification documents in both countries, ascribing themselves to one or the other nationality according to the circumstances and requirements of the moment (for an example of this, see Galemba, 2018; Nollan-Ferrell, 2012).

In a work that analyzes the historical depth of the links between Guatemalan localities in the department of Huehuetenango and the Mexican state of Chiapas, Galemba (2018) argues that in general, residents of Guatemalan localities by the border area consider the possession of Mexican personal identification documents as more complete citizenship indexes. For them, owning Mexican “papers” means having the possibility of accessing better quality public resources and services than those offered by Guatemala. Something similar happens in L1 and L2. Although these villages are not exactly border towns, their inhabitants find that, in relation to Guatemalan “papers,” Mexican ones grant more rights and make it possible to access resources that are scarce in Guatemala. For the generation that left as refugees, the knowledge of how and under which circumstances to use these or other documents constitutes a learning that has been transmitted to young people, who have in turn updated and recreated it according to their new circumstances.

Differential valence, in this case, is inseparable from the experiences of refugees, the return and the continuation of the links inherited from those processes. The recollection of the interaction with the Mexican State in the past plays a central role when producing new meanings. Thus, it is not strange that someone has “papers” of “one side” and “the other side,” as differences emerge when inquiring into the procedures through which they were obtained. In this work I am interested in approaching the experiences of those who acquired birth certificates through buying or falsifying the procedures for obtaining them.

The fact that Guatemalans buy birth certificates, or that they participate in other fraudulent procedures to obtain them responds to two reasons. First, as Galemba (2018) argues, these are ingrained practices among people who reside in localities near the border. Second, at present, the trade in Mexican “papers” is encouraged by the increasing securitization of the southern border implemented by the Mexican State as part of its strategies to combat illegality and crime (Galemba, 2018; Marengo, 2015; Rioja, 2015; Ruíz, 2008).

In this sense, Galemba (2018) argues that “in a context where informal and illicit economies are increasingly profitable options and the informality associated with the productive activities of the poor permeates the formal sector” (p. 5), the government’s strategy of border securitization produces new assessment systems in which some actors and activities are positively positioned, while others are excluded and criminalized. The author calls this strategy “securitized neoliberalism.”

The theoretical view of Galemba (2018) reveals how the articulation of security policies and multinational trade agreements affects the lives of people whose routine is crossed by border dynamics. Likewise, it provides elements for a better understanding of the logics of statehood in the cross-border space. The overlapping of legality and illegality, confusion, transgression, and official suspicion that characterizes the State in the region become central to understanding its local concretions, and to thinking about the construction of citizenships and nation-belonging.

In a context like this, in which controls on irregular immigration by the Mexican State have been tightened, the extra-legal means of obtaining identification documents for Mexicans become attractive for those who wish to migrate, but who do not meet the requirements of the visa system. Consequently, it is feasible to affirm that the market for personal identification documents on the southern border is a concurrent phenomenon of the tightening of regional security, and that when the State restricts mobility, a market arises to replace its role, opening way to acquiring the sought-after “papers.”

As in other countries, also in Mexico the birth certificate is the cornerstone of the official personal documentation regime. In addition to verifying proper name, gender, and citizenship, “the certificate” accompanies the bearer during the subsequent institutional rites that will require him to authenticate his identification: acquiring a voting card and a passport, obtaining academic degrees, getting married, etc. (Market, 2012). “The card” is the other key resource for the validation of Mexican citizenship. Having a Unique Population Registry Code (CURP, for its acronym in Spanish) is also a significant step in the civil trajectory of individuals. The CURP grants readability to employers and complements the nomenclatures that enable government dialogues.

Birth certificates, voting cards and the CURP are the documents most coveted by Guatemalans who are trying to establish themselves in Mexico, as obtaining them is perceived as one of the key steps in the process of integration into Mexican society. By integration I understand the construction or maintenance of networks of relationships through which an individual or an organized group of individuals is linked to new social institutions, economic dynamics, and practices of statehood (Glick, Çaglay, & Guldbrandsen, 2006, p. 614). This is: access to better jobs and enjoying rights, goods and public services that are limited in Guatemala, but also being acknowledged by neighbors, friends, and colleagues.

Of all the Mexican “papers” carried by Guatemalans, a considerable amount was obtained following unorthodox procedures. Setting a figure can be an impossible task, especially if one considers that the lack of transparency in which such practices take place does not always allow identifying the boundaries between legality and illegality. What is possible to distinguish are some of the most common ways to obtain these “papers.”

In the cases recorded, Chiapas, Quintana Roo and Campeche appear as the entities that did provide the “papers,” possibly both due to physical proximity and the accumulated knowledge of how to approach the agents willing to negotiate documents, and because of the laxity that is apparently the rule in administrative procedures in these entities. In L1 and L2, the best-known methods for obtaining personal identification documents by unorthodox means are those described below. As will be seen, these take place both in the field of legality and illegally. The reader should not be surprised upon finding that the limits between one field and the other becomes blurred in practice.

#### *Pretending to be a Mexican who has Never Processed your Personal Identification Documents*

A common method of obtaining Mexican birth certificates fraudulently, although it may soon fall in decline, is to go to the Civil Registry office of border municipalities, adapting your biography to pass as a Mexican who has lived without documentation. Accompanied by witnesses, the interested party will explain the reasons why he lacks a birth certificate and request that one be issued. The performance of the witnesses is key, since they will attest the story that has been presented. The witnesses are often former neighbors in the camps who agree to tell little lies on behalf of their friends. It is also usual for the application to include letters of recommendation issued by common land authorities, municipal agents or others who provide proof for the completion of bureaucratic procedures.

At the time of showing before the Civil Registry authority, presenting themselves usually incorporates fragments of narratives of exclusion, poverty, violence, etc. In this modality, the Civil Registry agents do not participate in the commission of illegality, they simply proceed by following the means of proof that are presented to them. It is not only about adapting the biography based on little lies, but on presenting one that, in addition, expands the field of ambiguity that surrounds legality in the border area. Many young people born after a return have been able to obtain birth certificates through this means.

#### *Lending, Renting, or Buying Birth Certificates to Relatives or Friends*

Someone who plans to travel to Mexico with documents yet lacks Mexican “papers,” can request someone, a relative or friend of the same age and who has a birth certificate, to lend or rent the document with the promise that at the end of the trip it will be returned to them. In other cases, the owners of birth certificates give up their rights definitively and whoever buys them takes the identification included therein with which they start a new life.

#### *Birth Certificates as Part of Electoral Patronage*

Electoral campaigns in municipalities on the Chiapas border have been another source providing birth certificates for young people from localities of return. In Maravilla Tenejapa



or Comitán, for example, it has been usual for leaders of political parties with influence in the Civil Registry to offer to “nationalize” Guatemalans if they commit to later vote for them. As documented during the fieldwork, municipal agents or common land commissariats linked to contending political parties tend to be active in these bureaucratic mechanisms. In this modality, State agents do not act motivated by the possibility of receiving a payment, but rather seeking to expand patronage networks that provide them with votes.

#### *Relatives who Register Children Born in Guatemala in the Mexican Civil Registry*

Former refugees know that vital records in border municipalities are imprecise and they do what they can to take advantage of this. Today, it is no longer just adults who are trying to obtain Mexican “papers” through unorthodox channels. In L1 and L2, it is usual for parents of newborn children to request a relative who legally resides in Mexico to register children born in Guatemala in the Mexican Civil Registry, presenting them as their own children. As they argue, they do so to ensure the possibility that in the future these children can move through the cross-border space without legal obstacles, but also for them to access the benefits and services that the Mexican State offers its citizens such as health and education, as well as in the future to be able to access formal jobs.

#### *Buying Birth Certificates in the Civil Registry*

There are two ways to illegally acquire a birth certificate: civil registries and municipal agents in border towns. In any of the cases, the interested party must agree on the terms and conditions of the commercial operation with the enabling agent. Prices can range from 6,000 to 8,000 Mexican Pesos, while waiting times to receive the document vary from a few days to two or more months. Those who buy birth certificates are exempt from explaining to the Civil Registry agents why they lack the document. For this reason, if they so wish, they can adopt a different name than the one they have in Guatemala and another date of birth; that is, transforming into a different person, which happens quite frequently. In the localities of return, knowledge of how to establish contacts with employees of the civil registries and municipal agents is readily accessible. The information is provided by those who have already made the purchase or by someone who has served as an intermediary between buyers and issuing agents.

However circumstantial decision-making may result, in L1 and L2 purchasing is the most promising way to acquire “papers,” since it shortens the process for their acquisition and increases the chances of being successful. It should be specified that although the existence of falsified cards is well known, and that it is relatively easy to access them, in both villages those who spoke about the subject said that they would prefer to buy birth certificates and then apply for the voting card. That bought birth certificates are preferred over apocryphal credentials is due to the former being “authentic,” that is, it is a reliable document even if

the procedure for obtaining it is fraudulent. With the birth certificate, people usually manage the voting card on their own, this time undertaking the procedures also carried out by ordinary Mexican citizens. In addition, whoever acquires them will be recorded in the official books. Apocryphal cards, on the other hand, seem to be desirable to those who enter Mexico seeking to reach the United States. For a brief account of cases of Guatemalans detained in Mexico for carrying apocryphal electoral cards, see for example: *Diario de Yucatán* (2018), *Marcris Noticias* (2018), *Noticaribe News* (2016), or *Radio Fórmula* (2016). For those who prefer to buy birth certificates and manage to get the card themselves, completing the procedure before the National Electoral Institute becomes the first in a series of steps aimed at establishing permanent relationships with the Mexican State and society. In a way, they try to incorporate the authenticity of the document and stabilize a veracity about themselves that they perceive as elusive.

Next, I exemplify the variation of experiences to which I referred in this section. I will make use of the voice of Rodrigo, an inhabitant of L1 whose family has tried at different times to obtain Mexican “papers” through unorthodox mechanisms. Rodrigo returned to Guatemala in 1994. His two youngest children were born in Guatemala, and upon reaching legal age, both tried to obtain birth certificates through the political patronage networks already described. The first was successful, the other failed, according to Rodrigo because the commissariat of the common land in whose jurisdiction the camp where his family stayed as refugees was located was a “*malacate*” [bad guy], who intervened so that his son was denied “the papers.” The state of things being thus, the young man had to find another way to achieve his mission; he sought out the municipal agent from a neighboring town who agreed to sell him “the certificate.” Thus, the two youngsters obtained their Mexican “papers.” Like their older brothers born during as refugees, they now travel to Mexico without caring for the immigration checkpoints.

When Rodrigo spoke about how his children tried to obtain Mexican birth certificates through political parties, he did so as if he were referring to just another of the objects that electoral campaigns facilitate, the only difference being that instead of money, farming tools or clothing, in this case politicians gratify with national legality and citizenship.

When I asked him if he could identify the party that offered documenting Guatemalans, he was unable to give an accurate answer. First, he mentioned the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI, for its acronym in Spanish), then the Democratic Revolutionary Party (PRD, for its acronym in Spanish), and then said with a laugh: “well, they all do the same,” leaving in me the impression that the distinctions I was trying to establish did not matter, or that he was unable to be precise about them. What he was sure of was that such forms of patronage flow through exchanges between kin and networks of friends spread out on both sides of the border. He explained that that was “information sent by friends and relatives who live there.” However simple it may seem, obtaining “papers” through political parties is not always so, mainly because this option is only available during electoral campaigns.

Although the way to follow when you one is to acquire “Mexican papers” depends on the circumstances and the resources available, often people are successful only after having made several attempts and combined different options, a matter confirming the circumstantial nature of decision making on the subject. Rodrigo’s family has accumulated enough skills to navigate the institutional and legal interstices of the personal documentation regimes of both countries with relative success. In addition to their underage children, a brother and one of the sisters have tried to obtain documents for themselves and their children, also through unorthodox procedures. Moisés, one of the brothers, who also returned to Guatemala in 1994, “returned” (Lerma, 2016) to Chiapas without documents in 1996. Having lost his rights in the camp, he “bought papers.” After a while he returned to Guatemala to take his wife and children with him, he bought them documents and they moved to Tijuana, from where the family in turn moved to the United States.

Rodrigo’s sister, whom I will call Matilde here, also “returned” to Chiapas shortly after her brother and she married a Mexican, with whom she had four children. Their children have Mexican identification documents only. In 2017 Matilde returned to Guatemala with the intention of registering her children in the Guatemalan Civil Registry and processing the corresponding birth certificates. The sudden interest in obtaining Guatemalan papers had a clear purpose: the family planned to migrate to the United States posing as Guatemalans fleeing gang (so-called “*maras*”) violence. This style of migration became popular in 2014, after the U.S. government began granting asylum to citizens of Guatemala, El Salvador and Honduras who were victims of gangs (Hiskey, Córdova, Malone, & Orcés, 2018). Matilde wanted to document her children in Guatemala to “take advantage of the benefit” that the U.S. government offered Central Americans. A benefit from which, in Rodrigo’s words, Mexicans were excluded. The attempt to document the children as Guatemalans was unsuccessful, according to Rodrigo, because in this country it is “hard to get papers,” a common expression that alludes to how difficult the procedure is.

The experiences of Rodrigo’s family are illustrative and allow for us to understand the strength that “papers” acquire when parental life takes place on both sides of the border. The knowledge regarding the variety of documentation possibilities that the family possesses constitutes a kind of accumulated patrimony accrued from stays as refugees, returns and the subsequent interactions with the personal documentation regimes of both States that have been capitalized at different times. Although in the stories shared by Rodrigo several of the attempts to obtain “papers” failed, for him they (“papers”) do not seem to have lost the imaginative force that he assigns them. As fetishized artifacts, for Gordillo (2006) personal identification documents anchor a public relationship with the State that, in addition to authorizing their bearers to move legally, incorporate a set of qualities that if one knows how to “take advantage of” can open opportunities to access a better life.

## SIGNS OF BELONGING TURNED INTO MERCHANDISE

Seen this way, the procedure for obtaining personal identification documents and bought Mexican “papers,” expressed in the language of Misse (1997, 2017, & 2018), acquire the status of political merchandise. According to Misse (2018), this notion seeks to apprehend an exchange relationship that can be freely agreed upon but is generally constrained by one of the parties; free or forced, it takes place outside the legal regulations of the State (Misse, 2018, p. 68).

The concept of “political merchandise” refers to goods, services, or objects that nominally only the State can dispose of, therefore they are not available in the open market. As their commercialization is prohibited, they are confined to the field of illegality, to extra-economic spaces and hidden from the public eye. Naming them as political merchandise rather than simply corruption helps to reveal the underlying economic rationale for the transaction, thus clearing away the moral sanction that often permeates discourses on corruption. In this way, it is a question of “transactions that damage public morals more than private ones, that affect the State more than the individual and that aspire to some type of particularist legitimation or, at least in certain cases, finding some moral justification or neutralization of guilt” (Misse, 2017, p. 41).

Said otherwise, political merchandise is not about legal objects circulating through illegal channels, but rather objects that are not available in the formal market because their very nature has defined them as non-marketable. This is the case of the “papers” sold by individuals with access to the official documentation regime. Thus, when the agent of a certain Civil Registry office agrees to illegally sell a birth certificate, what he is actually trading is the authoritative power deposited in the office that he holds to grant recognition of citizenship. Even though political merchandise is proscribed, and its commercialization is penalized in the legal codes, the law itself and the capacity to circumambulate it that bureaucrats enjoy nourishes a fertile space of ambiguities for the flourishing of commercial operations in which the illegal and the legal are brought together until they become indistinguishable.

Misse (1997, 2017, & 2018) has insisted that political merchandise expresses economic relations that refer to extra-economic situations, and that by trading them a small portion of the monopoly that the State has reserved for itself is negotiated. As we know, the State resembles an assemblage of organs, agents and regimes that are quite disorganized and disconnected, whose functioning is usually incoherent and contradictory. Often, the agents of the State designated to protect legality are unable to do their job fully, or they find that openly cooperating in the expansion of “gray areas” (Auyero, 2007) is profitable for them. The Mexican birth certificate trade takes place in precisely these gray areas. That is, in spaces of State power where the legal meets the illegal to the point of almost indistinctness.

The experiences of Guatemalans who buy Mexican “papers” show that the limits imposed by legality are not the last frontier of possibilities. Their experiences show us that when what people want goes beyond the line of legality, the law becomes merely one of the challenges to overcome; and so, creativity, inherited experiences and access to certain opaque relationships can make the difference between having or not having what you want. The moral limbo that precedes the knowledge of being involved in a potentially punishable act is usually, in most cases, subsumed in arguments of legitimacy, cunning, necessity or superior intelligence to take advantage of legal ambiguities and the consent of government agents to transact.

Now, it should be noted that not all participations in the market for political merchandise engender new illegalities. Just as the small cross-border trafficking of consumer goods is not comparable with drug trafficking, the buying of birth certificates is not comparable with the large-scale corruption of the government. A senior official who is prevented from criminal investigations by giving a bribe knows that he is feeding a chain of impunity. In this hypothetical example, bribery is already a second act of illegality, as it is intended to cover up previous infractions. Those who buy “papers,” on the other hand, usually do so motivated by the desire to integrate into Mexican society as legalized individuals. They are not thinking of expanding gray areas of illegality, but simply of being recognized as subjects of citizen rights, ironically resorting to illegality, all this in a context of border securitization that excludes them from the visa system.

That sort of uncaringness that I detected among my interviewees when they talked about their bought “papers” seemed to be related to the certainty that the commission of a potentially punishable act was justified because in this way an aspiration was carried out whose legitimacy was of greater value than the protection of legality in abstract (Renoldi & Álvarez, 2016).

In this way, the experiences of these people show how the market for political merchandise can empower the agency of marginalized individuals when it comes to managing to obtain proscribed objects.

By buying “papers,” the children of ex-refugees who wish to settle in Mexico, but who lack supporting documents to claim dual nationality and who fail to meet the requirements of the official visa regime, navigate around immigration control policies. In these transactions, legality and illegality are just two moments in a broader and more complex relationship that interconnects the State with individual economies and biographies.

## POLITICAL MERCHANDISE AND BORDER SECURITIZATION

Metaphorically, political merchandise functions as the additive that links economics with politics and with those individual initiatives whose sole cause flows out of the ordinary. When the “papers” are obtained through extra-legal means, but their materiality is reliable, it can be paradoxical to verify that the illegality comes from within the framework of the government system in charge of documentation. It would be wrong to take such an irregularity as a malfunction that calls into question the authority of the State; the most appropriate thing is to think of it as a constitutive quality of the State as an assembly of partially connected, and sometimes contradictory, bodies, from which moral topographies and spatially differentiated security interventions emerge that make the southern border a territory in which the force of the law weakens (Marengo, 2015).

It is not by chance that in the centralist discourse of the Mexican State, the southern border usually appears as a space where illegality abounds, and citizens may not be totally loyal or be prone to act deceitfully. Anyone who has passed through the southern border crossings has possibly noticed immigration agents questioning Mexican citizens, pointing out that they are not being honest in their answers, mistaking them for Guatemalans, or pressuring them to justify their transit. It is easy for someone to argue that immigration agents act in this way because the criteria that are usually used to differentiate nationals from foreigners, for example, phenotype and language, become inoperative in these spaces. Certainly, between Guatemalans and Mexicans, there is a kind of “qualitative similarity” (Carruthers, 2017) that makes them indistinguishable at first glance.

In a scenario like this, in which Guatemalans emerge as “close foreigners” (Jansen, 2009) whose mimetic tactics put immigration control devices against the wall, the border may no longer be the key point that distinguishes inclusion from exclusion. Such an affirmation does not presuppose the disappearance of the haste to design new and more sophisticated control devices; it rather confirms that the centralist predisposition to think of the southern border as a porous inner margin is intrinsic to its definition. Although at certain times the “papers” acquired through unorthodox procedures equip Guatemalans with a tool that allows them to circumvent the barriers set against irregular migration, as will be seen in the next section, there are cases in which the desire to integrate into the Mexican society that many cultivate can pose challenges of an unexpected appearance.

*Dealing with the Contingencies that the new Identification Brings*

Sharing new citizenship means an improvement in people’s lives, yet at other times it can bring unsuspected, and even ridiculous, problems. Reviewing the dilemmas faced by Adán, a young man who obtained his voting card through a bought certificate not even a year before August 2018, will allow us to examine the authentication uncertainties to which I have alluded. Adán was born in Guatemala; he is the penultimate of seven siblings of which three

were born as refugees, and the rest after the return. All of Adam's siblings, except his younger sister, live in Playa del Carmen, but before that they were in Comitán, Chiapas, and other Chiapas towns near the camp from which his family returned to Guatemala. Adán lived with his parents in Guatemala until he was twelve years old.

Upon finishing elementary school, Adán moved to Mexico to live with his oldest brother, who was then living in Comitán. Because he was undocumented and for "lack of interest," during this time he did not attend school. After two years living in Mexico, his parents decided to bring him to Guatemala, mainly so that he could resume his studies. After finishing secondary school, Adán returned to Mexico to live again with his older brother, who had by then moved to Playa del Carmen. During the time that Adán was in Playa del Carmen, he worked as a clerk in a small business owned by one of his sisters.

After two years, Adam returned to Guatemala to visit his parents. When he returned to Mexico, he was detained at a mobile immigration post and deported; then his mother agreed to support him in buying a birth certificate. Following recommendations from neighbors and their own family knowledge, they found an agent from the Civil Registry of a municipality of Quintana Roo willing to make the transaction. The procedure took two days. Carrying the birth certificate that identified him as Mexican, the young man entered Mexico as a Mexican by birth and obtained his voting "card" in Playa del Carmen.

When telling his story, Adán described the mechanism that made the document possible as if it were a legal procedure; as I have argued, he finds that his behavior does not violate the public morals of the Mexican State. His greatest discomfort seemed to be directed at his mother's refusal to accept him changing his name. The last time I spoke with him, while sitting in front of the beach, in Parque Fundadores, Playa del Carmen, Adán was playing with "the card," passing it from one hand to another. Then I asked him to show it to me to look at it carefully; he agreed saying: "it's real," while smiling. Thus, I sensed that for him the document carries a peculiar force different from what it acquires for the rest of the Mexican citizens. His gesture denoted a sense of the outstanding difficult to capture with words. Are you Mexican? I immediately inquired. He smiled again and continued playing with the card, saying nothing.

Although Adán is no longer concerned about immigration checkpoints in Mexican territory, this is not the only issue he must pay attention to. As it is for others too, his greatest challenge is to adequately perform his new identity in such a way that it is credible to others. In 2018, Adán resumed his studies. As mentioned before, the boy finished secondary education in Guatemala; by presenting the apostilled study certificates he could attend high school level, however, although he has such certificates, he chose to start again primary level in the continuing education system because he feels incapable of explain why as a Mexican, he studied in a Guatemalan village whose mere naming evokes the aspirations that motivated the return. Ironically, his decision not to present the Guatemalan study certificates stems

from the suspicion that if someone scrutinizes his past, he will not be able to back the authenticity of the documents.

Adam’s initiative to go back to school corresponds to his interest in becoming a professional bartender; a career option that he finds attractive. But as long as he does not manage to deal with the contingencies presented by the new identification, he will not dare to go beyond the comfort zone that his brothers offer him. Until then working in the formal market will continue to be outside his reach.

Despite feeling “Mexican,” Adán is still not convinced of the full authenticity of the document that identifies him as such.

After the last meeting I had with Adán, I had the impression that he harbored the feeling that if someone scrutinizes his biography, he would not be able to clear up the irregularities that might arise. His nervousness about the authenticity of his identification document emanated from knowing that the links between his intimate self and the person the document identifies are weak. Paradoxically, the source of suspicion was his own self. In a certain way, Adán felt he inhabited two personalities: the one partaken of in the intimacy of the family and the circle of his close friends who know his origin, and the one that appears on the card that identifies him as born in Mexico. Rightly so, Reeves (2013, p. 502) draws attention to the fact that there is always a space for indecision “beyond the document,” whose volatility results from the fact that documents never stand on their own. This contingent space full of unforeseen possibilities is what the young man fears facing.

Adán’s story confirms that while accessing the personal documentation regime clears up several uncertainties, buying “papers” fraudulently also opens unexpected unknowns, to the point of almost paroxysm. He shows that for the incorporation of the new identification to be successful, it is necessary to develop a set of skills that allows to carry forward all small actions of daily life in which the reflective self takes the lead, transmitting to others the certainty that one is the person that the document identifies.

#### MEXICANS WITH ADJECTIVES?

As has been seen, the ways to obtain Mexican “papers” through unorthodox procedures are diverse, and the concurrent games of legality and illegality lack the clarity of the ideal types. For the descendants of former refugees, the voting “card” and the birth “certificate” are more than passes to circulate through the cross-border space. Their portability grants legibility as ordinary citizens and brings closer the possibility of becoming a Mexican yet owning the document does not clear up the problems of authenticity derived from having obtained it extra-legally. The “papers” demand for the bearer to adapt his biography to the new identity and that he learns to behave as a “Mexican.” By staging the new identity, people face the possibility of triggering misfortunes that must be adequately cleared away.



At this point, it is worth inquiring about the type of citizenship exercised by those who have managed to establish themselves in Mexico making use of personal identification documents obtained by resorting to unorthodox procedures, and who lead regular lives in the sense that they enjoy all the rights that the “card” provides.

To begin with, it is wise to reiterate that attempting to gain citizenship through the buying of “papers” and the use of apocryphal identification documents are more widespread practices than may appear at first glance. Analyzing the experiences noted in different contexts, several authors have documented a wide series of modalities of access and use of apocryphal personal identification documents (Abarca & Bibler, 2018; Ordóñez, 2015; Reeves, 2013; Statz, 2016). A constant in these studies is the use of qualifiers to apprehend the peculiarities that, according to the authors, distinguish the citizenships acquired fraudulently from those that with little rigor in this work are called “ordinary citizenships” (Statz, 2016). For example, Statz used the term “paper life” to define the descendants of Chinese immigrants who obtained personal identification documents in California after civil records were destroyed by the fires that followed the 1906 earthquake. The author contends that although Chinese immigrants managed to pass themselves off as citizens born in the United States, in practice the logic of racial segregation prevailing at that time prevented them from fully exercising the rights that citizenship granted to whites.

In a similar study, Ordóñez (2015, 2016) used the term “parallel citizenships” to describe Central American immigrants in the United States who use false social security numbers to access less precarious jobs. In these cases, argues the author, the “papers” serve as tools for simulating legality and their use is limited to the workplace: those who use them are unable to enjoy any rights other than employment.

The above examples clearly show the limitations for the exercise of full citizenship faced by those who acquire personal identification documents through fraudulent mechanisms. Despite the similarity between the cases presented and the experiences of the descendants of former Guatemalan refugees who buy Mexican “papers,” I doubt that it is necessary to use adjectives to define the type of citizenship to which they have access. While the Central Americans studied by Ordóñez are only partially incorporated into U.S. society, Guatemalans who access Mexican citizenship carrying “papers” bought through extra-legal means do so on the same terms as ordinary Mexican citizens. In most cases, they manage to lead full public lives in the sense of exercising political rights (they vote, marry, access social security, acquire public credit, etc.). This is indicated by the abundance of cases that I registered in Cancun and Playa del Carmen of people established in Mexico who have accessed the state housing system using bought birth certificates.

In addition, their status does not contemplate differentiation criteria, as is the case with former refugees who accepted the naturalization offered by the Mexican government to those who declined returning to Guatemala (Lerma, 2016; Ruíz, 2008).

At this point, it is important to reiterate that the “qualitative similarities” (Carruthers, 2017) existing between Mexicans and Guatemalans render useless the usual criteria from which foreigners are usually segregated. This issue becomes more complex when it comes to the descendants of former refugees, as I noted above, as the cultural closeness between the areas of departure and arrival and the rich heritage of “Mexicanness” obtained from older generations have prepared them so that when the time comes to enter Mexico, they know how to pretend being “Mexicans.” So, the willingness to “be Mexican” attributed to them in the surrounding villages is not merely a matter of idealism or the effect of nationalist publicity emanating from the neighboring country.

Such peculiarities will not be understood if the long history of displacement and the constant efforts to update affective ties with Mexico are not considered (Camus, 2008; Hernández, 2018; Hurtado, 2001; Piedrasanta, 2019; Rousseau, de la Aldea, Rojas, & Foxen, 2015). In a similar way, the imaginative fecundity produced by national difference and that aligns both countries with offers of quality for unequally valued lives is inscribed in the exercises of resignification of the experiences of refuge, return and the continuous transit of relatives across the border area. Despite the imaginative force contained in “papers” as artifacts of citizenship, as I exemplified when reviewing the trajectory of Adán, these people must keep their Guatemalan past in the back or find the ideal means to make both identities match.

#### CLOSING REMARKS

Obtaining personal identification documents implies establishing a particular type of relationship with the national State that issues them, linking their bearers with certain sets of policies and practices of statehood. As we have seen, sometimes “papers” are invested with a particular agency that goes beyond their quality as identifying signs. It is also not enough to access them; you must learn how to deal with the contingencies that may derive from the new identity.

In the studied localities, the experiences of refuge and return are projected into the present to structure the horizons of expectation and make migration a catalyst for future events. The impetus to “appear Mexican” that many ex-refugees and their descendants aspire to actualize, and that they seek to update through the continuation of affective ties with Mexico, transforms this country into an object of desire that they cannot always access legally, but can indeed access by means of other procedures. For these people, acquiring Mexican “papers” seems to be an imperative for belonging, as well as for the cultivation of parental and friendship ties arranged through the cross-border space due to the possibilities that these offer to transit into and settle in the country. As indexes of belonging, “the papers” place people in frames of sociability and material structures whose evaluation always takes place in comparative relationships.

In a context in which the controls on undocumented migration are being strengthened, the market emerges to provide what allows people to move and settle in Mexico as an ordinary citizen. Certainly, the act of documenting oneself as a Mexican citizen while also being Guatemalan, and doing so by resorting to extra-legal mechanisms, has its own history, it could be said, as old as the interest of the Mexican State to control undocumented mobility in the southern border area, regardless of how common such practices can be. In this paper I have set forth that the descendants of ex-refugees are distinguished from other Guatemalans who also have access to double documentation because their interest in obtaining “papers” derives from the desire to settle in Mexico and be incorporated into the national community as Mexicans without adjectives.

Although the trend to solidify the securitization of the southern border increases the devices that monitor irregular human mobility, control is never total. As I showed in the article, ex-refugees and their descendants have managed to respond to this with relative success, implementing a rather ingenious arsenal of creativity that has allowed them to participate in the games of double documentation, whether it is by presenting birth certificates borrowed from relatives or friends as if they were their own, taking advantage of the networks of political patronage in border municipalities that offer “papers” in exchange for votes, adjusting their biographies trying to prove that they were born in Mexico, or buying birth certificates. It is in this way that the unorthodox practices to obtain Mexican “papers” feed and are fed by the strategy of securitizing the southern border. Thus, while on the one hand migration policy for the southern Mexican border restricts human mobility, on the other, the agents of the official personal documentation regime oil the machinery that allows to circumvent the migration control devices by making of willingness, surveillance, circumventing and adaptation a single set of relationships marked by reciprocal influences.

Translation: Fernando Llanas.

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