Autonomy of Migration: From the Political Production of Borders to Migrant Struggles

Autonomía de las migraciones: de la producción política de fronteras a las luchas migrantes

Guillermo Castillo Ramírez[1]

ABSTRACT

Within a global context, the increase in migrations in different regions of the world during this century has led to an increment in academic production on migration. The aim of this article is to analyze the autonomy of migration from the approaches of two of its greatest exponents, Mezzadra and De Genova, who investigate migration's political condition, addressing the relationships of mutual influence between migrants, borders, and the State. The contribution of this paper is to show how this theoretical approach focuses on two fundamental processes to understand migration. On the one hand, it refers to the actions, strategies, and practices of those involved in shaping cross-border migration. On the other hand, it considers the role of States and borders as legal-political and historical constructs in shaping international (often *irregular*) migratory flows.

Keywords: 1. autonomy of migration, 2. migrants, 3. border, 4. America, 5. Europe.

RESUMEN

Dentro de un contexto global, el incremento de las migraciones en diferentes regiones del mundo durante este siglo ha llevado al aumento de la producción académica sobre el tema migratorio. El objetivo del presente artículo es analizar la autonomía de las migraciones a partir de los planteamientos de dos de sus máximos exponentes, Mezzadra y De Genova, quienes indagan la condición política de las mismas, abordando las relaciones de mutua influencia entre migrantes, fronteras y Estado. El aporte de este trabajo consiste en mostrar cómo este enfoque teórico se centra en dos procesos fundamentales para entender la migración. Por un lado, hace referencia a las acciones, estrategias y prácticas de los involucrados en la conformación de las migraciones transfronterizas. Por otra parte, considera la función de los Estados y las fronteras como constructos jurídico-políticos e históricos en la configuración de los flujos migratorios internacionales (frecuentemente *irregularizados*).

Palabras clave: 1. autonomía de las migraciones, 2. migrantes, 3. fronteras, 4. América, 5. Europa.

[1] Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, Mexico, gcastillo@geografia.unam.mx, https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8188-9929

INTRODUCTION

In the context of those processes that have characterized the onset of the new century (globalization, increasing inequality, concentration of wealth, dynamics of regional economic and political integration, exhaustion of the neoliberal nation-State) (Sassen, 2006; Gregory et al., 2009), international migration has been one of the most widely spread dynamics throughout the world.

Thus, the processes of human mobility across national borders obey different causes and are related to various dynamics (precariousness of the productivity and socio-material conditions of existence, demand for labor force, violence and conflicts, socio-environmental disasters, among others) (Márquez & Delgado, 2012; Lucas, 2014; Brettell, 2015; FitzGerald, 2015; Hardwick, 2015), which is why migrations have diversified in both social and ethnic-national terms (De Haas et al., 2020).

Likewise, according to the Population Council (CONAPO, acronym in Spanish for Consejo Nacional de Población, 2018, 2019, 2020) and other studies (Ariza & Velasco, 2012), the demographic volumes of migrants have also increased internationally in recent years. Some of the most frequent destinations of international and *irregular* migrations from the global south[2] are northern countries (whose economies highly demand labor force) such as the United States (Pew Research Center, 2014a; Pew Research Center, 2014b; Ley and Peña, 2016; CONAPO, 2020) and Canada, in North America (CONAPO, 2010, 2014, 2014, 2017, 2018), and Germany, France and England, in the European Union (CONAPO, 2019).[3]

From the Social Sciences and Humanities, the study of migration has also undergone an accelerated development and consolidation since the end of the 20th century. Today, it is a multidisciplinary and international field of research with an extensive academic production of thousands of papers in various schools across the world (United States, England, Mexico, Spain and France, among others) (Ariza & Velasco, 2012; Brettell & Hollifield, 2015; Pisarevskaya et al., 2020).

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[2] When it comes to the main emigrant expelling countries for 2019, the first place was India, with 17.5 million; second place was Mexico, with 11.8 million, followed by China, with 10.7 million; the fourth place was held by Russia, with 10.5 million (CONAPO, 2020).

[3] In 2019, there were 272 million international migrants in the world, of which approximately 18.6% aimed at the United States (the first-place destination); the second place was held by Germany, with 4.8% (CONAPO, 2020). In terms of migrant-receiving regions, Western Europe (the group of high-income countries) accounted for 23.2% of all migrants worldwide, followed by North America (mainly the United States and Canada) with 21.6% (CONAPO, 2020).

At the national level, a wide range of research centers and institutes have addressed international migration issues in different regions of Mexico since the end of the last century,[4] as have also done so graduate programs[5] and specialized national journals (with international impact at the Latin American level) focused on these research areas.[6]

In the context of the increase and diversification of migration in different regions of the world (CONAPO, 2020; De Haas et al., 2020), and taking into account the increase in academic production on this topic at a global level (from different disciplines) (Pisarevskaya et al., 2020), the aim of this article is to analyze the autonomy of migration as an approach that investigates the political constants of migration, following after Sandro Mezzadra and Nicholas De Genova —two of the main personalities in the field—. To this end, we address not only the agency and capacity for action of migrants in overcoming adversity (the so-called migrant struggles), but also the role of borders as historical legal-political constructs in the shaping of international migration flows (oftentimes irregular).

Thus, the questions structuring this paper are: what is the contribution of the autonomy of migration (from its emphasis on politicization) to the study of cross-border/international human mobilities (mainly of the irregular type)? And, based on this approach, what role do the different groups of migrants, borders and the State play in the current analysis of contemporary international migrations (particularly irregular ones)?

From their specific disciplines and focuses, several scholars in Europe and North America have contributed to the development of the autonomy of migration approach (Bojadzijev & Karakayali, 2007; Papadopoulos et al., 2008; Mezzadra & Nielson, 2013; Scheel, 2013a, 2013b; De Genova et al., 2014). However, it is Sandro Mezzadra and Nicholas De Genova who have been fundamental in the shaping and consolidation of this approach. Mezzadra, from Italy and heavily influenced by Italian Marxism, was one of its first exponents, with contributions on the role of migrants and labor in the relationship between migration and capitalism, and the central role of migrants and their practices (Mezzadra, 2012, 2005). For his part, De Genova, working in the United States and England, addressed the production of borders and the processes of *migrant irregularization* carried out by States, as well as the *incorrigibility* of migrants and their struggles (De Genova, 2018; De Genova and Velasco, 2017).[7]

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[4] Other institutions include El Colegio de la Frontera Norte (EL COLEF), El Colegio de la Frontera Sur (ECOSUR), Universidad Nacional Autónoma de Mexico (UNAM), Universidad Autónoma de Zacatecas (UAZ), El Colegio de México (COLMEX) and Universidad de Guadalajara (UDEG).

[5] In terms of postgraduate programs, there is a master's and doctoral program on migration at EL COLEF, and a master's program at Universidad Iberoamericana in Mexico City.

[6] In addition to the international journals Migration Studies of the University of Oxford and International Migration Review of Sage (among others), there are other nationally renowned publications such as El COLEF's *Migraciones Internacionales y Frontera Norte*, and UAZ's *Migración y Desarrollo*.

[7] Mezzadra and De Genova's choice to deepen the understanding of the actors and socio-political orders of cross-border mobilities lies in the fact that they touch on three key axes of this approach: 1) the tense and

According to all this, the methodological strategy proposed hereby consists of addressing two axes: 1) the genesis and background of this approach, and 2) the investigation of its conceptual design (its characteristics, contributions and challenges). On the one hand, when it comes to the first of these axes, we analyze the social and academic context of the emergence and construction of the autonomy of migration; we trace both the intellectual influences (particularly the conceptual genealogies of Sayad's sociology of migration and Moulier Boutang's Marxism), and the social order processes related to pro-migrant activism and migrant struggles of the late 20th and early 21st centuries.

On the other hand, and in terms of the second axis, the key lines of inquiry are: a) the investigation of other types of relationships and mutual determinations between migrant groups, borders and the State; b) the tracing of the processes of socio-political and legal production of borders and policies of cross-border mobility control, and c) the scrutiny of the central role of migrant struggles and practices.

Thus, and in relation to the above, the paper is structured as follows: the first section describes some features of the study of migration from social sciences. After setting the context, the socio-historical framework of the emergence of the autonomy of migration is examined; this allows, in the following sections, to determine which are the core concepts of this approach, as well as to deal with some of the research and studies that have been based on it. Finally, the scope and challenges of the autonomy of migration are shown.

Thus, the contribution of this article is showing how, in contrast to theories with little interest in analyzing the social actors (rather centered on macroeconomic processes and studies focused on the State as a *generator* of citizenship and migration policies), the autonomy of migration contributes in two outstanding ways:

First, it makes migrants (their actions, practices and subjectivities) visible and places them at the center as key actors in the shaping of migration, the analysis taking into account their condition as social subjects with the capacity for agency, beyond mechanistic and single-cause explanations (frequently of an economic and, to a lesser extent, of a political nature). Secondly, it analyzes the role that the nation-State plays in these processes of cross-border human spatial mobility, by explicitly investigating borders themselves (and the migration policies that define them).

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diverse relations between migrants, State and capitalism in processes of mobility policies; 2) the strategies and practices of migrants as social subjects, beyond the State framework and with a certain degree of autonomy; 3) the processes of socio-political production of borders and migration policies.

THE STUDY OF MIGRATION FROM SOCIAL SCIENCES

International migrations are historical processes and have been related to the dynamics of modern nation-States (Gregory et al., 2009; Márquez & Delgado, 2012), yet they are also a structural part of contemporary global transformations (labor markets, socioeconomic changes in the country of origin, sending and receiving remittances, cultural transformations in destination and origin, etc.) (Lucas, 2014; Vertovec, 2014; Brettell & Hollifield, 2015). Migrations have increased worldwide since the end of the second half of the last century and into the current one (CONAPO, 2016, 2018, 2019). From just over 77 million migrants in the year 1960, it increased to over 257 million by 2017 (CONAPO, 2016, 2018, 2019).

Several disciplines have contributed to the study of international migration (Ariza & Velasco, 2012; Brettell & Hollifield, 2015). From history, one of the axes of analysis has been the development of migration over time, their changes and permanence in different time periods, by means of conceptualizations such as temporality, historical changes and historicity (Gabaccia, 2015). From anthropology and sociology, emphasis has been placed on the networks and resources that allow certain social actors to migrate, as well as on the processes of sociocultural change and ethnic-identity configurations in multicultural contexts in the societies of origin and destination (Kearney, 1996 & 1995; Velasco Ortiz, 2008; Vertovec, 2014; Brettell, 2015; Castillo Ramírez, 2017).

As for political science, one of the axes of analysis is the relationship between States and migrant populations, in the context of modern industrialized democracies, particularly in terms of the entry and exit of populations (with and without citizenship, and with and without migratory documentation). As Hollifield and Wong (2015) pointed out, immigration policies have received more attention than emigration policies.

In turn, geography, through conceptual frameworks such as space, region and territory, has focused on the treatment of processes of distribution and changes in the places of origin, transit and destination of migrants (Brettell & Hollifield, 2015; Hardwick, 2015; Castillo Ramírez & González, 2018), as well as on the dynamics of relocation and border crossing (Gregory et al., 2009). On the other hand, economics, through various scales (micro, meso and macro) and from different schools (neoclassical economics, segmented labor market theory, political economy of development), has dealt with the mutual determinations between migration (at origin and destination) and the processes of exchange and production of goods. In relation to migration, both regional economic integration in relation to the demand in first world labor markets and the deterioration of the productive apparatus in developing countries, and the relationship between migration and development, have been investigated (Márquez & Delgado, 2012; Lucas, 2014; Aragonés & Salgado, 2015; Martin, 2015).

However, there are also theoretical approaches that, from the background of more than one discipline, have influenced the contemporary study of migration; among them are the new economics of migration, the world system theory, and transnationalism (Brettell & Hollifield, 2015). For the new economics of migration, whose genesis can be traced back to Ravenstein and

the push and pull theory, families, and not individuals, are the units making the decision to migrate (balancing out risks and benefits in order to improve their living standards); this occurring in labor and labor demand markets (Martin, 2015).

From the world system theory, migration is produced by the expansion and consolidation of the capitalist system (and its constant need for labor force and living labor for its production processes) (Gregory et al., 2009). Through this expansion and its consequent inequality between developed and developing countries, traditional ways of life deteriorate and become socioeconomically and environmentally destabilized, this resulting in an increase of *peripheries* (Gregory et al., 2009). The peoples affected by this expansion migrate both because their socio-material contexts of life have been affected, and because of the expectation of higher income and the capitalist consumption practices in which they have been immersed.[8]

Another approach that evidences Marxist influence and has antecedents in diverse disciplinary crossings is the political economy of migration (Márquez & Delgado, 2012). From this perspective, the causes of migration are of a historical-structural nature and have different scalar orders (meso and macro); in addition, according to this theory causes refer both to the contexts of expulsion at origin (living conditions under a lack of socio-material development), and to the demand for labor force in the labor markets of the destination places (developed countries of the global north). The aforementioned circumstances arise in the context of political asymmetry between countries (different levels of development and a strong wage differential), particularly in the context of the expansion of current neoliberal capitalism and the regional integration and internationalization of the labor market aimed at minimizing the costs of production (Márquez & Delgado, 2012).

Lastly, the theory of transnationalism should be highlighted, which has played a prominent role in the literature on migration. In the undergoing of international migration experiences, individuals establish and maintain social, economic and cultural relations at various levels and of diverse characteristics, which communicate and link the origin and destination societies (Glick-Schiller et al., 1995; Vertovec, 2009), beyond and in spite of national borders (Kearney, 1995, 1996). The terms *transnationalism* and *transnational practices* make it possible to account for the fact that migrants make their lives not limited or restricted to a single locality and a single national border within a country, but rather responding to the requirements and conditioning factors of households and societies established/located in two —or more— national States (Glick-Schiller et al., 1995). Yet other authors, from Anglo-Saxon geography and Mexican and US anthropology and sociology, emphasize that transnationalism refers to movements or a network of links and connections of people and material and immaterial goods (Kearney, 1995; Velasco, 2008; Gregory et al., 2009) across and beyond national borders (Kearney, 1996; Velasco, 2005).

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[8] Their migrations take various forms: undocumented and unskilled labor; documented and unskilled labor; documented and skilled labor, among others (Gregory et al., 2009).

THE EMERGENCE OF THE AUTONOMY OF MIGRATION THEORY

Origins and Background of this Analytical Perspective

The autonomy of migration approach has its origins in two processes from fields that are apart (academia and activism), yet related to each other. On the one hand, the theoretical background of French critical approaches to wage labor from the Marxist perspective of Moulier Boutang (1998),[9] but also and notably so in terms of the conceptual precedents for the autonomy of migration, the political sociology of migration of Sayad (1992, 1999a), which made it possible to think beyond economistic optics and position migrants as social individuals as the central axis of analysis, in the deliberate understanding of the political context in which their life and mobility experiences took place.[10] Likewise, Sayad's reflections positioned the political state of things of the production of cross-border human mobility at the center, by investigating the way in which nation States, based on certain categories and legal-administrative procedures aimed at certain populations (foreigners and non-citizens), develop the concept/category of the migrant (Sayad, 1999a, 1999b). As this author pointed out, without the State there would be no migrants (Sayad, 1999a) and no borders (as we understand them today).

On the other hand, when it comes to activism, in the European context of the early 2000s, another important fact in the genesis of the autonomy of migration approach were the dialogues and exchanges between various groups and collectives of activists, students and academics from Germany, France and Italy (Bojadzijev, 2009; Mezzadra, 2011; Cordero et al., 2019). As Sandro Mezzadra points out, given the diversity of migrant groups and experiences to each of these three countries (Germany with its guest worker system, France with post-colonial migrations, and Italy with more recent migrations in the 1980s and 1990s), and taking into account the specificities and particular features of irregular migrations to these points of Europe, from its inception, the autonomy of migrations approach acknowledged and weighted in the heterogeneity and differentiation of approaches, experiences and migratory processes (Cordero et al., 2019). Thus, this approach makes visible the flexibility and plurality of experiences, approaches and historical cases that characterize migration.

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[9] One of the main contributions of Moulier Boutang's (1998) approach was to focus on the political condition and subjectivation processes of migrants as a labor force on the move.

[10] As far as Sayad is concerned, he emphasizes his commitment to address the point of view and actions (social and political) of migrants, and how this accumulation of visions and practices plays a relevant role in the understanding and factual constitution of contemporary cross-border human mobilities. On the specific point of the centrality and prominence of migrants, Sayad's reflections (1999a, 1999b) are a clear antecedent for the autonomy of migration theory (particularly in terms of migrant struggles).

A Different, Critical View of Migration

Far from considerations of a mainly economic (macro-structural) and political nature (in terms of the legal sphere of citizenship), the autonomy of migration approach was from its inception thought of as a different and critical view of migrations, and especially of migrants (in their relationship with themselves, with the nation States of origin, transit and destination, and with borders and migration policies, in the context of contemporary capitalist systems) (Mezzadra, 2005; Papadopoulos et al., 2008; Mezzadra & Nielson, 2013).

Rather than as a finished and rigid theoretical framework, the autonomy of migration theory can be read as a research hypothesis (Cordero et al., 2019) and as a conceptual structure undergoing development, with a number of key axes: migration and the exploitation of labor in the context of neoliberal capitalism; the social and political agency of migrants and their various resistance practices and activities; the political subjectivation in and of migrants; the productions of borders as selective and differentiated exclusion/inclusion devices; and the political and socio-legal construction of migratory irregularity, among others (Mezzadra, 2012; De Genova et al., 2014).

Within this framework, one of the nodal tenets of this approach is to make the inquiry revolve around "the subjective practices, desires, expectations and behaviors of migrants themselves" (Mezzadra, 2012, p. 160), explicitly acknowledging that migrants, in their multiple and precarious cross-border spatial mobility dynamics, are inserted in various exclusion mechanisms and processes (related to borders and the dynamics of migratory regularization/irregularization), processes of violence and State and labor exploitation/domination in various countries (Picozza & Castillo, 2021; De Genova, 2018).

This context does not pertain an idealization of cross-border human mobilities, insofar as it accounts for the complexity and "ambivalence of [migrants'] subjective behaviors and practices" (Mezzadra, 2012, p. 160). Nor is it an apology for migration, insofar as it does address the production frameworks of such mobilities (Cordero et al., 2019). However, it is indeed a critique of economistic visions (in terms of their strong and unilateral economic determinism), due to the fact that, for the autonomy of migration theory, migrations cannot merely be reduced to the processes of labor supply and demand between countries of origin and destination, within the framework of regional processes of international division of labor in the era of globalization.

It also distances itself from studies on cross-border mobility and migration policies that understand the dynamics of citizenship towards migrants mainly as (exclusionary) legal procedures, in frameworks of migration regulation aimed at determining who is a citizen and who is a foreigner (in relation to the holding certain documents issued by the national State). In this vein, and underpinning an alternative structure for thinking about the political dimension of migration, Mezzadra specifies that, from autonomy of migration theory, it becomes "necessary to conceptualize citizenship in a different way from that employed by conventional studies, in which the essential concern consists of integrating migrants within an already existing legal and political framework" (Mezzadra, 2012, pp. 160). It is in along this line that the author emphasizes that from this approach "we highlight the importance of the practices and claims of those who are not necessarily citizens in legal terms" (Mezzadra, 2012, pp. 160-162).

Autonomy of Migration: Migrants and Border Production

The autonomy of migration theory is a set of diverse approaches in the socio-political, spatial and temporal orders of cross-border mobilities (Bojadzijev, 2009; Mezzadra, 2011; Casas-Cortés et al., 2015; De Genova & Velasco, 2017; De Genova, 2018). For reasons of space, and so as to highlight the most important contributions, here we present three of its main axes: 1) the politicization of migration (in relation to the State, citizenship, migrants and borders); 2) borders as processes of legal and socio-political production, and 3) migrant struggles.

Different Conceptions of the Relationship Between
Migrants, Citizenship and the State

Autonomy of migrations theory is characterized by an approach based on more complex, comprehensive and political relations between the nation-State (with its migration and border policies), borders and the heterogeneous groups of migrants, inscribed in the framework of the diverse places and temporalities of international migration processes (Mezzadra, 2011; Domenech & Boito, 2019). When analyzing this topic, nation-States (especially those of transit and destination) of migrations, are not only seen from the legal frameworks of who is a citizen and who is not —and the legal procedures associated with citizenship— (Hollifield & Wong, 2015), but also from a broader political —not only institutional— lens, which accounts for the various processes of power, exclusion and violence towards migrants. In this sense, effort is made to read the relationship between nation-State and citizenship from other optics and dimensions (especially those of individuals).

On the other hand, as will be seen later in this section, borders are read not only as physical barriers and material infrastructures, but also from more processual and relational perspectives, as socio-political and legal constructs of the nation-State (in its relationship with different social actors and in specific historical contexts). Thus, from the autonomy of migration approach, essentialist considerations and static views are avoided; therefore, it becomes possible to investigate how borders are influenced and determined, not only by nation-States, but also by the different actions, practices and strategies of migrants (especially those who are irregular).

In addition, as will be developed later in this section, migrants are not perceived as passive subjects, but rather from their own points of view, actions and practices, in such a way that they have a relevant role in determining (to a certain extent), both the shaping of borders and certain (anti) immigration policies. A relationship of mutual determination and impact is thus revealed, still with various gradients and intensities, between nation-States (especially those of transit and destination) with their (migratory) policies, borders (involving border policies and actions) and migrant groups (with their discourses, practices and actions).

Borders as Socio-Political and Juridical Constructs

One of the most important approaches of the autonomy of migration theory pertains the particular way in which it conceives borders (as political-legal constructs) (De Genova & Velasco, 2017; De Genova, 2018; Picozza & Castillo, 2021), and the relationship of mutual determination between these and migration processes (Mezzadra, 2012; Mezzadra & Nielson, 2013). This approach clearly departs from more classical conceptual ones, which from political science and political geography understand borders as a form of (legal and political-administrative) boundary related to the emergence of nation-States and the geopolitical order between countries, whose historical origins date back to the Treaty of Westphalia (Gregory et al., 2009), and which are based on processes such as sovereignty (dynamics of internal and external individuals in a territory from which the former originate), territoriality (the control of a given and appropriated space by a given nation-State) and international relations (in the reinforcement of distinctions among countries and their geographical and political boundaries) (Gregory et al., 2009). In addition, borders are read and constructed as symbols and material expressions of the sovereignty of the nation-State.

Instead, and in an exercise of denaturalization and de-essentialization (De Genova et al., 2014), for the autonomy of migrations theory, borders, rather than mere lines and boundaries (fixed and rigid) with forceful material expressions (walls, fences, etc.), also imply, and above all, practices and policies reflected in certain physical infrastructures. These are diachronic constructions with interventions of different orders (political, legal, administrative), which are de facto changeable (spatially and temporally) (Mezzadra & Nielson, 2013; De Genova, 2018). Hence their undeniable historical condition and their dimension as territorially mobile dynamics, produced according to various political and ideological purposes and intentions within the framework of different scalar orders (micro, meso and macro).

It is particularly relevant to understand borders, rather than in an essentialist and immutable way (as if they were static objects), as articulated relations of various types (social, political, legal) (Picozza & Castillo, 2021). However, as pointed out by Mezzadra (2012), although borders often involve processes of exclusion and veiled and open violence towards migrants, these same borders must also be seen as complex territories of tension and asymmetrical power relations, in which migrations and borders are mutually constituted in a bidirectional and differentiated manner (Mezzadra & Nielson, 2013), and where the role of migrants is relevant. Thus, for Mezzadra, both the production of borders and the irregularity of migrants can be approached, rather than as mere dynamics of domination and exclusion within the framework of the State and its legal apparatus, as "a strained and conflict-based process, in which subjective movements and migration-related struggles are an active and fundamental factor" (Mezzadra, 2012, p. 160).

In this sense, from the standpoint of the autonomy of migration, there are two related dynamics that allow us delving deeper into the aforementioned dimensions (externalization of borders and border regimes). On the one hand, and from a framework that circumscribes geopolitics, the externalization of borders refers to political-administrative and territorial dynamics and procedures

to geographically extend certain migration and border policies of a given national State to a different one (De Genova et al., 2014).

On the other hand, the term border regime bets on a constructivist perspective of borders that not only denaturalizes the conceptualization of them and transcends classic dichotomous conceptual schemes, but also acknowledges the diversity of State and non-State actors and institutions (as well as their respective actions and visions) inserted in their production processes (De Genova et al., 2014). In this sense, it not only identifies State logics, discourses and practices in the production of borders, but also accounts for those of migrants in their mobility dynamics, and the other social actors related to this process (non-governmental organizations, pro-migrant groups in society, among others), who challenge and react to State actions of immigration control and containment. In this framework, borders are not reduced to a single form of organization (that of the State), but are constituted as territories of tension and conflict (Mezzadra & Nielson, 2013; De Genova et al., 2014) in an undeniable political condition (within the framework of diverse and asymmetrical power relations).

Migrants as Active and Constituent Actors in Migration

Another of the strong theoretical stakes of the autonomy of migration approach is the centrality ascribed to migrants within human mobilities across different countries, times and spaces. Of course, this approach acknowledges the huge diversity of migrant groups and experiences, with different forms and strategies for carrying out their mobilities and desires. This commitment to the central role of individuals can be found in at least three dimensions that are developed below.

Migrants as agents who (through their actions, practices and discourses) hold a very prominent role in shaping migrations (and their associated processes and orders: borders, migration and border policies, and so on) (Mezzadra, 2012; De Genova et al., 2014).

The relationship between migrants and the nation-State they intend to reach, and how migrants relate socially and politically to that destination country (Mezzadra, 2012).

Migrants as social actors deploying different strategies (open and/or veiled) to face the political and legal order of certain national States that exclude and fail to acknowledge them (due to migrants lacking immigration documents).

Regarding the first two dimensions, authors such as Mezzadra proposed that, in the face of certain countries that irregularize and illegalize those who do not have certain immigration documents, migrants act as if they already were *de facto* citizens in the country of destination (Mezzadra, 2012). In this sense, it stands out that beyond the focus on migration policy and borders, seen from the point of view of the political-administrative procedures of the nation-State (such as those centered on migratory status in terms of legal documentation authorizing regular stay in the country), the autonomy of migration theory focuses on how individuals relate *de facto* to the nation-State in which they want to stay.

Thus, Mezzadra points out that "the autonomy of migration approach (...) notes that migrants—documented and undocumented—*act* as citizens and insists that these migrants are *already* citizens" (Mezzadra, 2012, p. 160). According to this author, the above attempts to address citizenship from another point of view, not only from the State institutions' political interest of a certain country to incorporate migrants to their legal and administrative order through various processes. On the contrary, yet keeping in mind the socio-legal and political-administrative context in which they are located, and realizing that they are not citizens in legal terms, the autonomy of migration theory focuses on and highlights the importance of the actions, discourses and strategies of migrants in their interactions with State institutions. On the other hand, it also points to the way in which the various strategies they deploy during their cross-border mobility's impact on and determine the way in which migration and border policies are shaped (in relation to those who are not legal citizens from the State's point of view).

Regarding the third dimension, the autonomy of migration approach has made two conceptual developments in terms of the incorrigibility of migrants (Picozza & Castillo, 2021), and especially on *migrant struggles* (De Genova et al., 2014). In relation to the former, De Genova proposed that, as opposed to visions that only perceive migrations as a result of economic-material processes or as dynamics derived from structural causes, incorrigibility emphasizes and bets on the human freedom of individuals to move (according to their interests and across different international borders), as an expression of the agency of these social subjects (Picozza & Castillo, 2021). In this context, the mobility and strategies of migrants are the manifestation of their incorrigibility in the face of and in relation to particular border regimes and legal frameworks of given national States, so that, for this author, they can be read as practices of civil disobedience. In this sense, "the politics of incorrigibility, then, are radically anti-assimilationist, and also radically open" (Picozza & Castillo, 2021, p. 5).

As for migrant struggles, these can be conceived in different ways and have two related meanings (De Genova et al., 2014). On the one hand, the term refers to relatively organized migrant struggles that explicitly oppose, resist and are in tension with certain border regimes and immigration legal ordinances of nation States, within the framework of restrictive and exclusionary mobility policies (Squire, 2011; Picozza & Castillo, 2021). Examples include the struggles of the *sans-papiers* in France and the mobilizations of migrants in the United States in 2006; more recently and only in a certain sense, the *migrant caravans* of Central Americans and Hondurans.

On the other hand, in scenarios that do not allude to clear and open logics of confrontation and tension based on specific demands vis-à-vis certain States, *migrant struggles* also refer to actions, practices and discourses of resistance of a daily and local nature, through which migrants implicitly reject and challenge social, State and legal orders that exclude them (Mezzadra, 2005; Papadopoulos et al., 2008; De Genova et al., 2014).

These two senses described above show and highlight the diversity of the contexts and processes of cross-border mobility in which migrants are inserted, and from which they deal with different national States (within legal frameworks with rigid and exclusionary categories and

legal/administrative procedures determining who is a citizen and who is not); all this within the framework of asymmetrical power relations. In this line of analysis, migrations become dynamics of spatial and temporal mobility charged with tensions and political relations of struggle between migrants, borders and the nation-State.

In the terms of what has been just described, and according to the practices and discourses of certain migrant groups to confront the legal frameworks of immigration policies that do not account for them and nor recognize them as social subjects with particular interests and life projects, Domenech and Boito (2019) specify that, from autonomy of migration theory, "the potential radicality or disruptive force of some migrant struggles derive from their affirmation of incorrigibility and their refusal to codify themselves, within the conventional framework of the political language of the State" (Domenech & Boito, 2019, p. 164).

Scope, Trials and Challenges of Migration Autonomy

One of the main vantage points of the autonomy of migration approach is its critique of mechanical and monocausal perspectives of economic migration, which start from macro scales and emphasize the role played by economic change (in terms of productive processes, labor markets and labor force demand). It also distances itself from political analyses that approach citizenship and migration from the perspective of the nation-State. Criticism of these perspectives is largely based on the fact that they make migrants invisible as (constitutive and constituent) individuals and active groups of these (mostly forced) human mobilities of a cross-border nature.

Another contribution of the autonomy of migration theory is the central position given to migrants as social subjects and the *politicization* of their actions (in relation to their diverse strategies to overcome adversity and *confront* a national State of origin that does not fulfill their needs). As political agents and actors (with specific interests in relation to different nation-States), migrants make up heterogeneous/diverse groups, and hold different practices and discourses of resistance of varying intensities and characteristics (sometimes verging on struggle), within the framework of different orders and moments of their migratory processes and experiences (in the countries of origin and especially of transit and destination).

Along these lines, this approach provides a more comprehensive and deliberately political reading of migration. To this end, it is based on more complex and alternative perspectives on the processes of nation-State construction, as well as on the socio-political and legal productions of borders (and their immigration and border policies), and on the actions and strategies of migrants (as social actors enabled for social agency who make an impact on the border productions and immigration policies of different countries).

It is about rethinking from a different perspective the role of migrants and migrations, not only within the processes of highly precarious mobilities towards certain transit and destination countries (frequently in the global North and framed within certain regions such as Europe and North America), but also, as pointed out by Mezzadra (2012), within neoliberal capitalism and its production, labor and exploitation dynamics.

Nonetheless, this theoretical position is certainly limited in its scope, and so it is essential to ask when and where it is useful (in what contexts). For example, the autonomy of migration theory would not have much analytical potential in the investigation of migration processes of skilled workers to countries with inclusive immigration policies. Thus, it is clear that not all migrations can be read as the product of social groups in resistance and struggle with clear strategies of agency (in relation to and vis-à-vis certain State institutions).

On the other hand, it is true that there has been a marked geographical selectivity in terms of from which migration processes and which countries and regions this approach has been deployed and developed. The autonomy of migration theory, mainly by scholars from Europe, has been widely used to explain different migration processes (strongly represented in several African countries) to the Europe, as well as different migration struggles in that region, and the processes of securitization and border regimes in Europe and certain countries of that continent in the context of the 21st century (Bojadzijev & Karakayali, 2007; Papadopoulos et al., 2008; Bojadzijev, 2009; Mezzadra, 2012; Scheel, 2013a, 2013b; De Genova et al., 2014).

In Germany, several scholars have dealt with a number of issues related to this approach. From exercises on its definition (Bojadzijev & Karakayali, 2007) and that of migrant struggles in the global context (Bojadzijev, 2009), to critical studies on the scope of migration autonomy (Scheel, 2013a) and the relationship between migration and securitization (Scheel, 2013b). In Italy, Mezzadra's work has been very consistent and comprehensive, covering different topics that range from the relationship between migration and living labor, through migrant struggles and the State (beyond the socio-legal frameworks of citizenship), to the processes of border configuration in contemporary capitalism and the relationships between migration, borders and capital (Mezzadra, 2005, 2011, 2012; Mezzadra & Nielson, 2013).

In the United States, although with less effervescence and intensity than in Europe, and especially from the work of De Genova and some of his collaborators (Casas-Cortés et al., 2015; De Genova & Velasco, 2017), this approach has come to developments of its own, both in theoretical and thematic terms. Thus, it has been made use of to address various lines of work, from (generally irregular) migrations in contemporary contexts of border externalization (Casas-Cortés et al., 2015), to the sociohistorical dynamics of political-legal production of borders and migrant illegality and irregularity (De Genova & Velasco, 2017), as well as the incorrigibility processes of diverse migrant struggles (De Genova et al., 2014; De Genova, 2018; Picozza & Castillo, 2021).

Autonomy of Migration Theory in Latin America

Other recent works have explored the link between this approach and the occurrences in various latitudes of Latin America within the context of neoliberal capitalism, in terms of (irregular) cross-border mobilities, migrant vindications, securitization of borders, and processes of immigration criminalization (in countries such as Argentina, Brazil, Ecuador and Mexico, and in regions such as Central America, North America and South America) (Cordero et al., 2019).

Particularly in the case of Mexico, being a transit country for Central American irregular migrations, there are few and relatively recent studies that take up this theoretical approach (Cordero et al., 2019). Some research has delved into the relationship between international migration, borders, and processes of violence in the Central America-Mexico migration corridor (Varela, 2019). There are also recent works on Central American populations that, from specific groups of migrants (particularly women) and with specific cross-border mobilities (Central America and Mexico), have studied the complex relationships between migration, work and subjectivity (Willers, 2019).

In the case of other Latin American latitudes, and perceiving the production of space in a multiscale and regional way from the autonomy of migration theory, research has been developed on the opening of routes and trajectories between different countries (Ecuador, Mexico and the United States), in the context of different national and regional policies for the control of cross-border mobility (Álvarez Velasco, 2019). Now, further south, we find studies that have attempted to address the centrality of migrants through their struggles in the South American regional context (Domenech & Boito, 2019).

CONCLUSIONS

Autonomy of Migration Theory: Betting on a Different Perspective

One of the axes of this article was to open dialogue on and delve into the autonomy of migration theory. Our aim was not to limit ourselves to those positions that emphasize economic and macro historical-structural causes and processes in the analysis of migrations (such as asymmetric development levels, the deterioration of the productive apparatus and the labor market in the countries of origin, the processes of regional trade integration, and the strong demand for labor in the countries of the global north) (Gregory et al., 2009; Márquez & Delgado, 2012; Lucas, 2014; Martin, 2015).

However, while recognizing the specific weight of historical-structural dynamics in migration, the autonomy of migration approach bets on recognizing the central role of migrant groups in these complex cross-border human mobility dynamics (Mezzadra, 2012; De Genova, 2018).

This approach has focused mainly on the regions of Western Europe (where its main developments have taken place) and North America (particularly the United States). In this order of ideas, it would be suitable to further work systematically and develop the use of this conceptual framework to address migration processes (and their various related dynamics) in other regions of the world; in the American continent in this specific case. As examples of this, although we already have some works in certain countries of the southern cone, Mexico and Central America (Cordero et al., 2019; Domenech & Boito, 2019), it is still necessary to delve into research from these perspectives on the migratory processes taking place in our country and that originate in the North of Central America. This region and its precarious populations undertaking adverse cross-border mobilities can also be approached in more detail from the autonomy of migration theory.

Regarding the southern hemisphere, some works in South America (especially in Argentina) have resorted to this approach (Domenech & Boito, 2019), but more studies could be carried out from this perspective in various (origin, transit and destination) countries with important migratory flows (such as Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Venezuela, among others).

However, as previously mentioned, it is also true that this approach faces some challenges and limitations (its development has focused on very specific migrant groups, countries and regions, and so it is still necessary to apply this perspective to other contexts and processes). Still, one of its contributions is to center the discussion around the political condition of migrations from the migrant-border-national State triad, in national, regional and global contexts (and from the broad frameworks of power relations not limited to the reading of the political from governmental institutions, nor only from the nation-State referential).

Thus, this article shows how the autonomy of migration theory contributes in two quite important ways at the political level. On the one hand, it places at the center and makes visible the key actors of migration, taking as the guiding axis of its analysis the condition of migrants as social actors with a capacity for agency beyond mechanistic and monocausal explanations. This makes it possible to postulate that the diverse and heterogeneous groups of migrants, through their strategies, discourses and practices, also influence and determine to a certain extent immigration policies, borders and the role of national States (vis-à-vis migration). On the other hand, and by explicitly investigating the production of borders (and the immigration policies linked to them), the role that the nation-State has played and plays in these processes of cross-border human spatial mobility is addressed to a large extent.

Finally, the autonomy of migration approach not only distances itself from forced generalizations for different migrations, but also acknowledges the diversities and specificities of these (oftentimes irregular) processes of human mobility, and the particularities of their respective contexts. Without denying the fact that there are common processes of different scalar character and socioeconomic order for certain migrant groups, this approach still avoids falling into the temptation of either romanticizing or victimizing migrants. It also avoids unjustified exercises of homogenization/standardization of these groups, or of their mobilities, strategies and agencies.

Translation: Fernando Llanas.

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