

Humanity in Suspense. Mobility, Emotions, and Borders Humanidad en vilo. Movilidad, emociones y fronteras

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Emotions in mobility circumstances constitute a powerful symbolic component, both in the individual and the collective experience of migrants. This critical note seeks to contribute a reflection on the role of emotions in contemporary mobility scenarios, by exploring its analytical dimension as a key and little addressed component in the experiences, in the dynamics of flows, and in the international political management of border and borderized geographies.

It is important to note that the actions taken by States to regulate international mobility have severely transformed territorial borders. Contrasting with the traditional conception of national entities as geographical boundaries, migration control policies have not only produced a mismatch between the usual overlap between jurisdiction and territory (largely caused by externalization), but have also promoted *bordering* processes (López-Sala, 2015a, p. 516). In other words, borders are a socially constructed phenomena that delimit social categories (Paasi, 1996), and are understood not only as symbols of culture and identity, but also as tools of exclusion and inclusion that create spatial fragmentation and social differences (Newman, 2006), hence characterized by their mechanisms of selective permeability (Godenau & López-Sala, 2016). Also, borders are spaces negotiated beyond the boundaries of the State (Donnan & Wilson, 1998), defined by collective narratives and by the everyday experiences of the people residing therein. This last idea is in line with many of the reflections in this note.

This critical note agrees with the approach of Asakura (2016) from the sociology of emotions, where emotions are “a social construction whose understanding must be based on the analysis of the relationship between individuals and their context: it is an analysis of the emotional dimension of the experience lived by each individual” (Asakura, 2016, p. 17). Thus, emotions arise from the symbolic interaction that determines the ways of understanding and perceiving reality, and of

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giving meaning to our actions (Guedes & Álvaro, 2010). In that sense, emotions are cause and effect of action, “a sort of resource that allows [the social actor] to respond strategically to the imperatives of a situation” (Ariza, 2016, p. 20). The ethnographic work shows that emotions concur in their dual dimension: as a strategic resource and driving force throughout the migration process, and as a reaction to the diversity of situations experienced in the border contexts through which people transit.

Two migration dynamics frame the scenarios in which the emotions object of this discussion are observed, by means of empirical data and excerpts from various documented narratives. The comparative intention was to show the way in which borders arise as spaces where the emotional baggage of people in mobility is concentrated. It is worth noting that, even in contrasting scenarios and actors, in very diverse geographies, the emotions expressed are significantly similar.

The first scenario is on the westernmost fringe of southern Europe, on the border between Spain and Morocco: this is the case of African and Asian migrants and refugees who have crossed this border corridor at different times, and have found themselves stranded in the cities of Ceuta and Melilla, the two Spanish enclaves located in African territory. Due to geographical and political conditioning factors, these enclaves have become interstitial and liminal spaces, border-cities that have consolidated themselves as detention and confinement scenarios on the margins of Europe. Their status as peripheral territories in a geographically fragmented border, and their special status in the Schengen Agreement, has meant a management that incorporates a “double bordering” (López-Sala, 2015b), but also the overlapping of various forms of mobility.

The second scenario is Tijuana, located in the northwest corner of the U.S.-Mexico border. The bulk of the Central American caravans arrived in this city in 2018, transforming the city in a similar way to the bordering of Ceuta and Melilla, into a holding and waiting space resulting from the immigration policies of asylum and border control of the United States with respect to Mexico, thus playing an instrumental role in the externalization. The operation of racial and socio-economic filters which, although not new on this border, were then greatly strengthened.

In both cases, migrants have not reached their destination—not even migrants in Ceuta and Melilla—because in these enclaves, even though they are European territory, mobility is subject to internal control mechanisms that limit access to continental Europe. Migrants find themselves contained in what could be described as a “blurred wait”, a product of the management of the border as a space of containment and of the mechanisms of detention, entrapment and camperization. In these contexts, the testimonies collected reveal emotions that prompted the departure and later helped to sustain the illusion of reaching the intended destination. Likewise, emotions served as propellants to advance and resist in the journey, or were transformed into paralyzing walls, while others served to challenge the power of the structures in the antechamber of nation-States. This is how emotions are modulated in mixed migrations; that is, those migrations composed of diverse flows in relation to the reasons for leaving the countries of origin, and differentially categorized according to legal statuses, transiting through the same corridors and experiencing in one way or another the action of the State.

Subjectivities in Mobility and the Opposing Forces of the State

At the Spain-Morocco border, the imprint of the journey is so strong that it permeates through and through. It is an almost traumatic experience, a rite of passage, a process where all the migrant's capabilities are put to the test. A sea of emotions in continuous movement according to different situations and moments along the way, a balance of sorts between opportunities and obstacles. Courage and determination mix with fear and uncertainty. In the prelude to *the jump*, in that tense wait to find the moment to enter Spanish territory, the strongest emotion is that of no return, the feeling that there is no turning back. Returning equals death, a death in life, an emotional death. Some expressions of the immigrants interviewed show many of these emotions in the days before the jump. The following statements reflect their feelings. The names were changed to preserve anonymity, but not the nationalities.³

There you feel like a savage, like an animal. Stalking. Lurking. Always waiting. Waiting for the Moroccan police not to arrive. Lurking to find the moment [to jump] (Diallo, Guinean, personal communication, 2016).⁴

I was not afraid to jump. I was not afraid. Even if I could die, I was not afraid. Crossing is the end of my road. There is no turning back now (Moussa, Malian, personal communication, 2016).

In Ceuta and Melilla, already in Spanish territory, the hope, the feeling of “victory” for the desired arrival turns—due to immobilization and confinement—into despair, frustration, and discouragement. Migrants confess to being exhausted. This feeling of triumph, intoned in the collective chant of *bosa bosa*—meaning victory—is an expression used not only by migrants who manage to jump the fences, but also by their companions held in the Temporary Migrant Stay Centers (Centros de Estancia Temporal de Migrantes [CETIS]). Over the days and weeks, this feeling of triumph turns into a piercing sense of defeat when many of the migrants face difficulties in continuing their journey. Hence several of those who arrive subsequently try to leave Ceuta and Melilla by embarking hidden as stowaways on the ferries that cross the Strait of Gibraltar and the Alboran Sea. New fences have been erected because of this. In recent years, the perimeters of the access ports to the ferries have also been reinforced with fences and razor wire to prevent this crossing.

When I arrived in Ceuta I thought I had made it. That I could regain my dignity, to be a person... but I am here again, without dignity, without being treated as a person (Charles, Ivorian, personal communication, 2019).

I don't want to be in Melilla, I want to go to the great Spain. I want to get to Europe (Abou, Malian, personal communication, 2017).

³ Some testimonies were taken from the documentary *Waylaid in Tijuana/Retenidos en Tijuana* (Burgess et al., 2020), co-produced by one of the authors of this critical note.

⁴ The testimonies are the product of the authors' ethnographic work. To respect the principle of confidentiality, names have been replaced by pseudonyms.

On the border between Mexico and the United States, the immobility of migrant caravans results in similar constructions. These caravans arrived in Tijuana after traveling more than 4 000 kilometers for about 30 days, on foot and in transports obtained on a temporary basis. The massiveness of the caravan, constituted by contingents of around 2 000 people, represented an opportunity to count on economic resources, information, and relative protection during the journey. The emotional propellers of hope, courage, and faith encouraged migrants to go through the sadness and grief produced by the detachment from their land and affections, to overcome fear along the way, and to also overcome the uncertainty derived from not knowing and not being able to control what is to come. The euphoria of the arrival at the international border turned into frustration and despair when they saw the armoring of the United States wall.

Those who sought to enter the United States legally by applying for asylum were met by a long and complex administrative process, which limited the daily reception of a certain number of applications in insufficient quotas to cover the demand (metering), generating a backlog of asylum seekers on the Mexican side. In addition, Central American caravan migrants were forced to continue their asylum process through the then recently established Migrant Protection Protocols (MPP), a policy that forced them to return to Mexico while their case was being heard. A process that in 2019 represented, overall, a wait of eight months to more than a year (A. Silva Hernández, fieldwork, December 12, 2019). That is why in Tijuana it becomes impossible to lower one's guard or speak of victory; hence, the contention is not only physical, but also emotional. For migrants, the United States is the imaginary that persists as a destination and they vehemently charge it with hope. Throughout the journey, emotions are not incidental, but rather the foundation of the migrant journey.

When we entered the immigration station, we all thought that yes, we had entered the United States, thank God, everything is solved now. But it wasn't so. The person who interviewed me told me: "You are going to fight the case in Tijuana. You can't fight it in the immigration station". It hurt me so much because of what I have suffered, losing my wife, leaving my country because they could take my life... I just said: "well, what can one do, if it is an order from the government, from the president, what can one do". All that is left for us to do is to look down and pray God (Alec, Honduran, 2019) (Burgess et al., 2020, 41m26s).

A constant struggle between the subjective meanings of emigration and the opposing forces of the State is thus revealed. In these territorially distant borders, in these mixed trajectories, in the diversity of languages, cultures, and nationalities involved, emotions connect in a unitary experience: emigration, which puts their humanity in suspense. The testimonies collected at the Morocco-Spain and Mexico-United States borders show how this lived and shared experience is the fruit of the tensions that arise, on the one hand, between the migrants' desires and projects, their agency and their strategies of resistance, and on the other hand, the labels and structures delimited and imposed by the receiving States.

Fears and Determination in the Face of Walls and the Border

The walls of access to the destination are experienced as a scenario of uncertainty and suffering. Faced with these obstacles, emotions swing between the determination to cross, the difficulties of access, and the fear of rejection and detention. The border between Tijuana and San Diego is one of the most heavily guarded areas along the international border, with three contiguous fences several meters high, movement sensors, and constant surveillance by the United States Border Patrol. Tijuana is perceived as ambivalent: as a scenario of satisfaction for having managed to arrive, but at the same time of fear, as it is a dangerous border area.

I feel joy to be here [in Tijuana] after having suffered on the road. But I don't like Mexico, it is very dangerous, I don't want to be here anymore (Brandon, Guatemalan, personal communication, 2018).

Because all the people from the caravan were going to meet there [in Playas de Tijuana], to pass to the other side, we were going to jump over the wall, but nobody could tell if we were actually going to make it through or not (Michael, Honduran, personal communication, 2019).

Some of them told me that we should jump the fence all together, but all I could think was that they were going to catch me and deport me, so I said to myself: "I'm going to be patient" (Lester, Honduran, personal communication, 2019).

The fences of Ceuta and Melilla, erected at the end of the 1990s on the Spanish peripheral border, have the same features. They are heavily guarded physical containment and blocking structures, converted into instruments at the service of the control policies of the receiving countries. Over the years they have undergone major transformations, including several adjoining walls of great height, which have been completed with detection equipment such as cameras and motion sensors. In the perimeter of Melilla, already in Moroccan territory, a moat and an additional lower fence, mainly composed of razor wire, were also installed.

You have to jump, jump. You have to do it. Time goes by, time goes by and you know you have to jump. The fence is high, 8 or 9 meters... that's not a problem. The problem is that they put things to hurt us. How can they do that? That's not normal. They put things to hurt us, but we are people (Samory, Guinean, personal communication, 2014).

Waiting, Longing, and Disappointment at the Border

For the caravan migrants arriving at the Tijuana border it rises the administrative wall that constitutes the mentioned system of daily quotas for the reception of asylum applications and the Migrant Protection Protocols. The wait, fraught with uncertainty and frustration in precarious and unsafe conditions, can only be tolerated with hope and faith.

Likewise, the special statute contained in the Schengen Agreement of the cities of Ceuta and Melilla meant the transformation of these locations into waiting and processing areas at the European external border, where administrative walls were also put into practice. Thus, those migrants who request asylum in these cities must remain within their territory until the resolution of their application, which in practice implies a mechanism of restriction of mobility towards peninsular European territory that models a form of “bureaucratic captivity” (López-Sala & Moreno-Amador, 2020, p. 16). This limitation of mobility extends to migrants who do not apply for asylum, who are, however, only taken to mainland Spain through a referral policy based on the profiling of particularly vulnerable people, but which in practice responds to a quota mechanism that depends on the vacancy of the reception centers in these two cities. The mechanism of containing mobility and blocking transit transformed these cities into what migrants describe as a “gold prison” (López-Sala & Moreno-Amador, 2020, p. 15).

Here [in Tijuana] I have been able to sleep peacefully... not totally peacefully, but more safely than over there... I'm always afraid that they are going to come here. They are capable of anything (Berenice, Nicaraguan, personal communication, 2019).

Sometimes I feel desperate. I pace like an animal in a cage, out and back in... there is something that wakes me up in the middle of the night and makes me think about what I will do, what is going to happen. All that doesn't leave me alone (Pedro, Honduran, 2019) (Burgess, et al., 2020, 41m12s).

I feel trapped, this is a cage, like a prison. After arriving, they put you in the Center and you can't move, you can't move. I have been waiting for months. I did not ask for asylum in Melilla, I asked for asylum in Spain (Mohamed, Moroccan, personal communication, 2016).

I think about going back, but if I go back, I won't be able to leave again. You arrive here to die, it is not safe. I want to get to the United States (Sidney, Guatemalan, personal communication, 2018).

I am kind of happy because, out of all my family, I am going to be the only one who is going to get there [to the United States], not hiding, not running away from immigration. Yes, I am a migrant, but I am not going to be hiding from anyone, that is the only hope that makes me happy (Mari, Honduran, personal communication, 2019).

If I get deported, I will be nobody, I have nothing, I will be dead (Kumar, Indian, personal communication, 2009).

The detachment of such intense emotions alludes to pronounced processes of social, economic, and political exclusion, accentuated in border contexts of immobility. Geographic and territorial deprivation is the result of the migration and border control policies of the States that shape bodies retained in these *limboscapes* (Ferrer-Gallardo & Albet-Mas, 2016). These mechanisms and systems are challenged and resisted by individualities aided by fear, hope, and determination, emotions that function as promoters of action.

The analysis of emotions constitutes a common thread that runs through the processes of mobility from structures to subjectivities. These emotions are perceptible in the diversity of actors—migrants, government, State—and are even instrumentalized in border control policies through the exploitation of fear and the entrenchment of racism, aporophobia, and xenophobia.

For qualitative studies on international mobility, emotions are nested in the motives, senses, meanings, aspirations, and self-perceptions of migrants. In this sense, incorporating them as a category opens the possibility of explaining them in relation to the mobility of subjects who, because of their economic, socio-cultural, or health limitations, break away from the logics of those who are not able to migrate. Thus, the scope of emotions for action proposes new ways to understand the phenomena that challenge border control regimes, such as the caravans, the small boats in the Mediterranean, and the jumps and crossing attempts that do not culminate in Ceuta and Melilla. An analysis based on emotions, therefore, allows to take a step forward in understanding the motivations and actions of migrants, especially in contexts of profound restrictions on mobility, such as border territories.

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