

Trans-Mexican Migration: a Case of Structural Violence

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Abstract: This paper argues that the violence experienced by migrants crossing Mexico in their way to the United States needs to be understood as a case of structural violence. Based on several months of field work conducted along the migrant route in Mexico, the paper emphasizes that trans-Mexican migrants suffer not only from forms of direct violence such as beatings, kidnappings, and rape, but also endure great suffering from expressions of indirect violence such as poverty, hunger, marginalization, and health threats. Addressing trans-Mexican migration as a case of structural violence is also crucial in grasping the complex dynamics that characterize this violence, including the impunity and systematization of violence, and the social forces, policies, and institutions that perpetuate it.

I. Introduction

Trans-Mexican migration—the process of crossing Mexico in order to immigrate to the United States—is one of the most neglected and misunderstood aspects of Latin American migration. The constant exodus of Latin Americans to the United States over the past few decades has had complex and dynamic implications for the different countries of the region as places of origin, transit, and destiny of migrants. These complexities have often been overlooked. In Mexico, and in the Americas at large, the public’s concern for migration has been largely isolated to the U.S.-Mexico border. While the tremendous suffering taking place in this border and its ascribed controversies certainly warrants a great deal of attention, Mexico’s role as a country of transit and destiny of migrants has been largely ignored.

This paper focuses on the violence endured by trans-Mexican migrants in their way to the U.S. Every year, hundreds of thousands of Central and South Americans cross Mexico’s more than 3,000 kilometers from South to North, before even reaching the American border. For these trans-migrants, traversing Mexico represents perhaps the hardest and most dangerous trajectory in the process of migration. Since the early 1990s, U.S. pressure has led Mexican authorities to stem the flow of trans-migrants. Unlike the American immigration control model of closing off its border, Mexico has chosen to intercept trans-migrants through a broad web of road checkpoints across the country, closing off any road travel routes. According to the Mexico’s National Institute of Migration (INM), in 2005, the number of migrants captured by Mexican authorities reached a historical peak of 240,269 people (INM).¹ These check points have—of course—not stopped the migration flow, but only made the trajectory more risky by marginalizing migrants to extremely dangerous travel routes and means of transport, mainly the century-old cargo train. Not surprisingly, in light of the difficulties and the violence suffered by migrants, many have come to refer to Mexico as the “vertical border”.

¹ INM website database: http://www.inm.gob.mx/index.php?page/Estadisticas_Migratorias

The plight of these migrants has been adopted by a small number of religious and human rights organizations. The Catholic Church in particular has played a crucial role in establishing shelters along the train routes providing migrants with food and water. The presence of these shelters along the migrant path has also allowed them, in conjunction with human rights organizations and increasing media coverage, to document and denounce grave human rights abuses such as kidnappings and beatings.

Since the mid 1990s, an important amount of literature has been written in order to explain this largely untreated phenomenon. Filling in this knowledge gap, however, has not been an easy task due to the semi-clandestine nature of the migrant flow, and the inexistence of any formal record of the people passing through and the events taking place along the migrant route. Amongst the most noteworthy pieces, Casillas (1996) puts together a collective account of interviews illustrating the personal perceptions and interpretations of migrants of the different phases of the migration process including the decision to migrate, the experiences in crossing Mexico, and the aftermath of the voyage. Castillo (2000) looks at the recent tendencies of Central American migration and traces the migration policies of the countries involved. Olivia Ruiz (2003) on her part examines the dangers faced by migrants and the constitution of risk in the path around Mexico's southern border. More recent works of Casillas (2006) and Belén (2008) use newly available large sample surveys to map out focal points of violence and abuse against migrants.

While these are all important pieces that add up towards an understanding of trans-Mexican migration, there is still little knowledge of the intricacies of the dynamics of violence and the associated suffering experienced by migrants. Because violence—in its different forms—stands logically as the biggest obstacle and disincentive to migrate, we need to grasp the complex dimensions of the brutality taking place and the social structures perpetuating this violence. Documenting human rights violations is only the first step in deciphering the violence of the migrant route, a task that is by no means straightforward. After all, the migrant route is a constrained universe where “state presence” is a dubious concept; where local authorities might not necessarily represent the state's interest; where human rights discourses thin out when addressing more “unconventional”

kinds of violence such as marginalization or discrimination; a place where on occasions, the boundaries between victim and perpetrator are blurred in the general environment of lawlessness and survival of the fittest. Who are the victims? Who are the perpetrators? Who condones this violence? What are the kinds of violence that take place? How does this violence occur and how does it affect migrants? Why is this violence recurrent? Why does impunity prevail? These are but a few questions that stand before our understanding of one of the most crucial aspects of trans-Mexican migration.

I argue in this paper that the violence endured by trans-Mexican migrants presents a complex case of structural violence. The notion of structural violence refers to the social forces that inflict harm on people by constraining individual agency and preventing them from meeting basic needs (Galtung 1969; Kleinman 2000; Farmer 2004). This approach is crucial in grasping the complexities that characterize the violence endured by migrants throughout their path to the US border including the construction and prevalence of the impunity that characterizes it, the systematic nature of its perpetration, and the social forces, policies, and institutions that perpetuate it. More broadly, this paper sheds light on how structures of violence are built around the particular social group of trans-migrants or, in other words, how the structural violence framework functions in this specific reality, an analysis that has not been conducted in the existing literature on structural violence. The proposed analysis benefits from the life stories and interviews I compiled after several months of living and traveling with migrants throughout roughly the first 400 kilometers of their voyage (between Ciudad Hidalgo, Chiapas and Ciudad Ixtepec, Oaxaca).

The paper is organized as follows: Section 2 describes the migrant path and the violence encountered by migrants, and introduces the life stories of Marilú and Julio and their experiences on the migrant route. Section 3 outlines the analytical framework underlying the structural violence approach and borrows from the life stories of the previous section in order to apply such framework to the case-study of trans-Mexican migration. Section 4 explores important aspects of the dynamics of violence including the prevalence of impunity and the systematization of violence along the route, and analyzes

several social structures that allow for this violence against trans-migrants to take place. Section 5 presents final remarks.

2. Mexico as a country of transit for migrants

The role played by Mexico as a country of transit for Central and South American migrants dates back at least to the late 1970s. Even though Central America had historically been a mobile region—with large numbers of Salvadorians working in banana plantations in Honduras and Guatemalans picking coffee beans in Chiapas—the civil conflicts throughout the 1970s and 1980s led to an unprecedented exodus of people fleeing political violence (Castillo 2000, 2). While the majority of refugees settled within the region and in Mexico's most southern state of Chiapas, small populations of Central Americans living in the US since the 1970s encouraged many other Central Americans to move further north (Garcia 2006, 31).

The increasing flux of migrants during the 1980s led the U.S. to put pressure on Mexico to better control its Southern Border as of 1989. Although Mexico had already tightened its visa requirements for Central Americans in 1983, it was not until the late 1980s that Mexico became actively committed to the detention and expulsion of undocumented migrants (Garcia 2006, 69). Between 1988 and 1990, the number of Central Americans deported by Mexican migration authorities increased by 900%—from 14,000 to 126,000—(INM). By 1993, Mexico's migration control practices became formalized with the creation of the National Institute for Migration (INM) and the setting up of check points along the road ways mainly in the southwest corridor through the Pacific coast of Chiapas (Oliver Bush, interview July 14, 2008).²

2.1 The migrant route

Mexico's migration control efforts and the instauration of the highway checkpoint system permanently changed the reality of trans-migrants. These actions drove migrants out of the public view and marginalized them to some of the most inhospitable spaces of

² Oliver Bush is the director of inter-institutional relations of the INM

Mexican society such as the railroad tracks and backwoods areas (not accidentally called *caminos de extravío* or “lost paths”). Without free access to roadways, migrants have resorted to alternative and extremely dangerous means of transport to reach the U.S. border including the century-old cargo train and double floored trailers. Consequently, the migrant route has been carved around a restricted set of avenues combining roadways and railroad tracks. Map 1 illustrates the main migrant routes starting in the southern border states of Chiapas and Tabasco and climbing Mexico to different locations along its 3000 km long northern border. Whichever path and means of transport—or combination of them—a migrant decides to take is usually a function of previous knowledge of the route and access to money with which to pay for a *pollero* (smuggler), access double floored trailers, and bribe authorities. Nonetheless, for an important portion of the migrant flux which count with little or no financial resources, the only means of transport is the perilous cargo train, commonly known amongst migrants as *el tren de la muerte* (the train of death).

Unable to prevent migrants from hopping on the train, Mexican authorities have resorted to intermittently implement *operativos*, military-like operations where the moving train is stopped and fleeing migrants are violently captured (or what the INM euphemistically calls “asegurar”—to secure). While most *operativos* were originally concentrated in the South, a growing infrastructure of checkpoints and detention centers that has sprung up in recent years has allowed for *operativos* to take place all along the country (Casillas 2006).³

³ Unlike the United States—and most countries with strict migration control policies—Mexico’s infrastructure to detain and deport migrants is in place all along the country, as a result of which migrants never travel freely within or across the country.

Map 1:

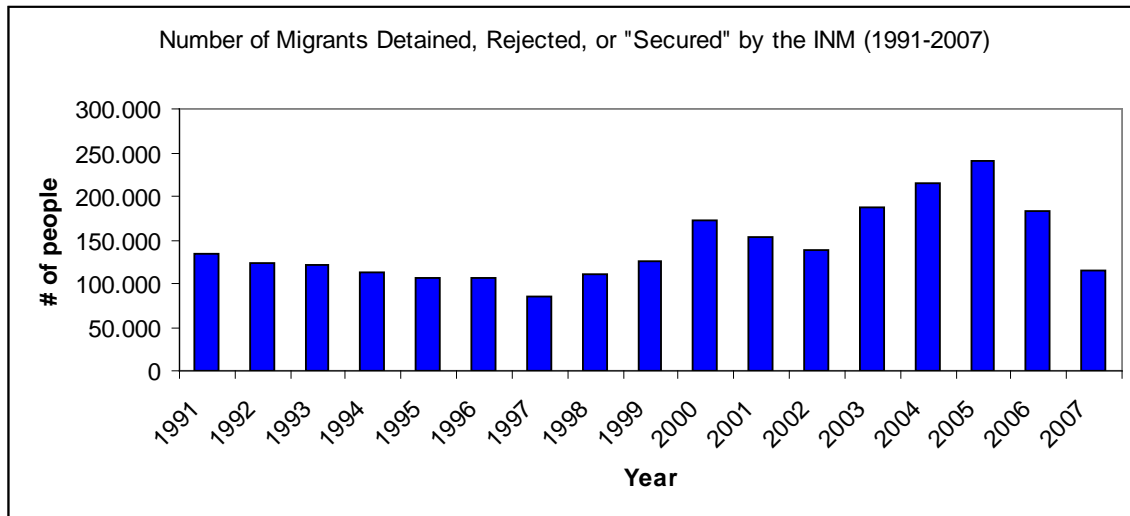


Source: Casillas 2006

As a result, the remoteness of the migrant route has provided a fertile ground for a theater of violence, suffering, and impunity. In crossing Mexico, migrants are systematically extorted, exploited, abused, kidnapped, raped, and even killed by authorities and criminals alike. Traveling on top of the cargo train for up to several months, they suffer not only from extreme temperatures and hunger, but many lose their limbs or die if they fall of the train. Similarly, even those migrants who pay substantial amounts of money to travel in double floored trailers often die from asphyxiation. This harsh reality affects a sizeable population reaching hundreds of thousands of people every year. Although the semi-clandestine reality of trans-migrants does not allow there to be an exact count of the people that attempt to cross Mexico, the number of migrants detained by Mexican authorities has served as a fair proxy for the total migrant flow.

INM statistics for the number of migrants detained has been greater than 100,000 every year since 1991—except 1997—, peaking at 240,269 migrants in 2005 (See Graph 1).⁴

Graph 1:⁵



Source: INM

2.2 Lives on the Vertical border

The complexities of this violence call us to bear witness to the lives of the victims of this problem through the details and nuances of biography. The richness of biography is a necessary tool for grasping how the migrant route functions as a “constrained universe” where people are systematically subject to grave violence and suffering. I present the stories of Marilú and Julio, two “average” migrants that despite their different background, gender, nationality, and experience in the process of migrating, travel the same path and suffer under the same systems of violence. In narrating these stories, I rely on the fact that the violence they are subject to is the norm rather than the exception

⁴ While this proxy is reasonably reliable, there are important limitations such as double counting migrants who are detained on their multiple attempts to cross Mexico, the fact that this number is a function of efforts and resources of the INM, and inaccurately counting the number of Guatemalan nationals since many non-Guatemalans prefer to declare themselves as such in order to be deported only to the southern Mexican border (Castillo 2000, 6).

amongst the hundreds of thousands of migrants that attempt to cross Mexico every year. This is not to say that every migrant suffers equally. After all, there are a number of factors such as money (access to a guide), knowledge, social networks, intelligence, and even physical prowess that play into a migrant's experience of everyday violence and shape the overall outcome of their attempt to migrate. Rather, I suggest that regardless of these factors, every trans-Mexican migrant suffers—some more, some less—under the same social machinery of oppression, and thus we can extrapolate from their experiences to explore and understand the complexities of how this violence takes place and identify the structures and forces that allow it to become entrenched and systematic.

Marilú's Story:

Marilú was born in the town of Esquipulas, as the fourth of five sisters. Her father abandoned the family 5 days after she was born. She only studied up to the second grade when she had to quit learning to help out at home. She started working at the age of 12, selling food to construction workers. By the time she was 14, one of the construction workers took a liking in Marilú and approached one of her older sisters to ask if she could marry her. "I did not love him, I did not even know him. But since I was little I was taught to obey so I did not question it."

During their 14 year marriage, not a day went by that her husband did not insult Marilú. At the age of 28, she decided to leave her husband and take her three children. She had fallen in love of another man—who is currently her partner—and moved in with him. However, that was not the end of the troubles brought by her former husband. A soon as he found out where Marilú was living, he came to her house with a gun and a machete to try to kill her. The police put a restraint order on him but he kept coming. "I had no choice but to emigrate with my partner and leave my children with my sisters."

The journey to the United States would quickly become a tragic odyssey. Marilú and her partner crossed Guatemala by bus and reached the border with Mexico at Tecún Umán. As soon as they approached the crossing, they were robbed at gunpoint, leaving

⁵ The INM has used different terminology for the migrants detained throughout the years. The data from 1991 to 2000 is provided for "devolutions" and "rejection", the data for the 2001-2006 period corresponds

them with no money to take the raft across the river or even go back home. They crossed the river by foot and started walking towards Arriaga, the first stop of the cargo train. Until 2005, the train departed from Tapachula, just a few kilometers from the border. In the summer of that year, Hurricane Stan destroyed the railroad bridges between Tapachula and Arriaga, leaving migrants to travel 300km and evade at least 4 road-side migration check points. Many migrants walk 7 to 12 days through backwoods areas to cross these first 300km. Others (usually with a bit more money since the drivers overcharge migrants) can afford to take small passenger vans which stop before the road check points, allowing migrants to go around them.

Like most first time migrants that travel by themselves, Marilú and her partner learned the hard way. They walked for two days only to find themselves in front of the Huehuetan check point, where they were detained by Mexican migration authorities. They were deported in less than 24 hours and dumped on Guatemalan soil. Without wasting any time, they crossed the same river by foot and started walking north once again. Since they didn't have any money, they asked around where they could work. They found a job in a mango plantation. Since they had been on the road for several weeks, they walked to the highway to look for a pay phone to call home, only to be apprehended by the police and deported once again to Guatemala.

On their third attempt, since they had a small amount of money from their job at the plantation, they were able to catch vans and go around migration check points. Marilú and her partner were extremely lucky to circumvent every checkpoint unharmed. For many years now, migration checkpoints have come to represent a bottomless gold mine for local criminals. Because migrants are forced to go around these checkpoints, criminals have to do nothing but wait for them to pass and violently rob them at gunpoint frequently raping the women. This is done on a daily basis, unquestioned, if not in cooperation with the authorities patrolling the roadway. Marilú had heard about the dangers surrounding these checkpoints, especially around the checkpoint of *La Arrocera*, and so they waited for nightfall and crossed it in the middle of a rainstorm. On the next

to migrants "secured", and the data for 2007 again for "devolutions".

day, they arrived to Arriaga where they barely had time to dry their clothes before hopping on the train that left at 10 pm.

At dawn, only a few hours before finishing the 12 hour train ride to Ciudad Ixtepec, the migrants aboard the train began to panic. It was not a group of *maras* (gang members) assaulting the train as it often happens, but the lights of an ambulance triggered a scare of an *operativo*. Like everyone else, Marilú and her partner jumped off the moving train. It did not take long for everyone to realize that it was in fact a false alarm, so they proceeded to climb back on. The low speed of the train crossing the town allowed them to climb back on. As Marilú tried to get on, a drunken man kicked her down. Holding on with her hands, Marilú's right leg was sucked in by the turning wheels of the train. Her partner carried her to the nearest clinic. "Lying in the hospital bed I told my partner he had to continue without me and reach the United States. I know that I can no longer work and sustain my family in Guatemala, so I count on him. For now I will stay helping in the shelter. I don't know if I'll go back to Guatemala, my children don't know I lost my leg and I don't want them to see me this way."

Julio's Story

Julio, a middle aged Salvadorian, is a visibly more experienced migrant. Slightly older than the average migrant in his/her twenties, he stands out for his confidence and maturity. He travels with three younger men, two women, and a 10 year-old boy. Like for many other migrants, the route is not unknown for him, and neither is the United States. This is the second time Julio emigrates in the past few years. Like many migrants that go back to their countries for family reasons, he is coming back from having spent six months with his two daughters in El Salvador.

Julio was a soldier in the Salvadorian armed forces during 12 years of civil war, and three years after the peace was signed. He left the army as a part of the demobilization process and became a bus driver in San Salvador. After some years, he became increasingly fearful of the violence affecting the streets of the city. In the street violence of San Salvador—and of many cities of the region—innocent civilians are the most common victims of an everyday war fought between rival gangs, and the police.

Bus drivers in particular have been targeted by gang members. Like many Central Americans, Julio remembers the days of the civil war with kind eyes. “It is true that there were massacres, but back then the war was between two sides, today they kill you for nothing...Give me a quarter! You don’t have it? Pum! You’re dead.” In light of this violence, and realizing that his wages would never allow him to educate his daughters, he took out his liquidation money from the army and left in search of the American dream.

The first time he emigrated, he joined a group of migrants and took a boat from El Salvador to the coast of Oaxaca. Upon arriving to Mexico, the group approached the driver of a large trailer and paid him to smuggle them north. In Querétaro, they boarded another trailer to take them to the border. In that last stretch, the trailer got stuck in a street festival. The sun of the early afternoon turned the aluminum trailer into a hot box. “We started screaming and kicking the blanks above us. Thankfully, the people from the festival heard us, so they grabbed the driver by the neck and made him open the trailer. Nobody died, but a few girls were unconscious for several minutes.”

This second time traveling north has been substantially harder. In their first attempt to reach Arriaga, the group he was traveling with was held up at gunpoint as they were circumventing one of the checkpoints.

“They took all our clothes off and made us lay on the floor with our heads down. We were nine men, six women, and a small girl. They raped the women in front of us, even the little girl was watching. We couldn’t do anything. They were all armed, one even had an *Aka* (AK-47).”

A few days after that incident the group was detained by the police just outside Arriaga and deported to their respective countries. In Julio’s second attempt, the group was held up again at *La Arrocerá*. “Thank God this time around they just took our money and did not rape any of our *companeras*. When we got to Arriaga, however, we found that a group of three women had been raped in *La Arrocerá* just two hours before we were held up. I would never bring my daughters through this path.”

The life stories of Marilú and Julio are revealing of a profound complexity and a disquieting regularity of the brutality affecting trans-migrants. These stories show that the violence and suffering experienced by trans-migrants is not limited to direct acts of violence such as beatings or rape, but is also manifested in the poverty, hunger, and the health threats suffered in the migrant route. Their life stories also denote that these incidents of violence are hardly incidental or fortuitous. The day that Marilú lost her leg, she was not randomly riding the cargo train. When Julio was held down at gun point while the six women he was traveling with were being raped, it was not a coincidence that they encountered a group of armed criminals. In both cases, the agency of these migrants was constrained within a large socio-political structure which marginalized them to the most inhospitable places, forced them to take the most dangerous means of transport, and guaranteed the impunity of those perpetrating this violence. In other words, they were both victims of structural violence.

3. Understanding trans-Mexican migration as structural violence

This section discusses the meaning and scope of structural violence and applies it to the case of trans-Mexican migration in order to analyze the different kinds of violence affecting migrants.

3.1 Characterizing structural violence

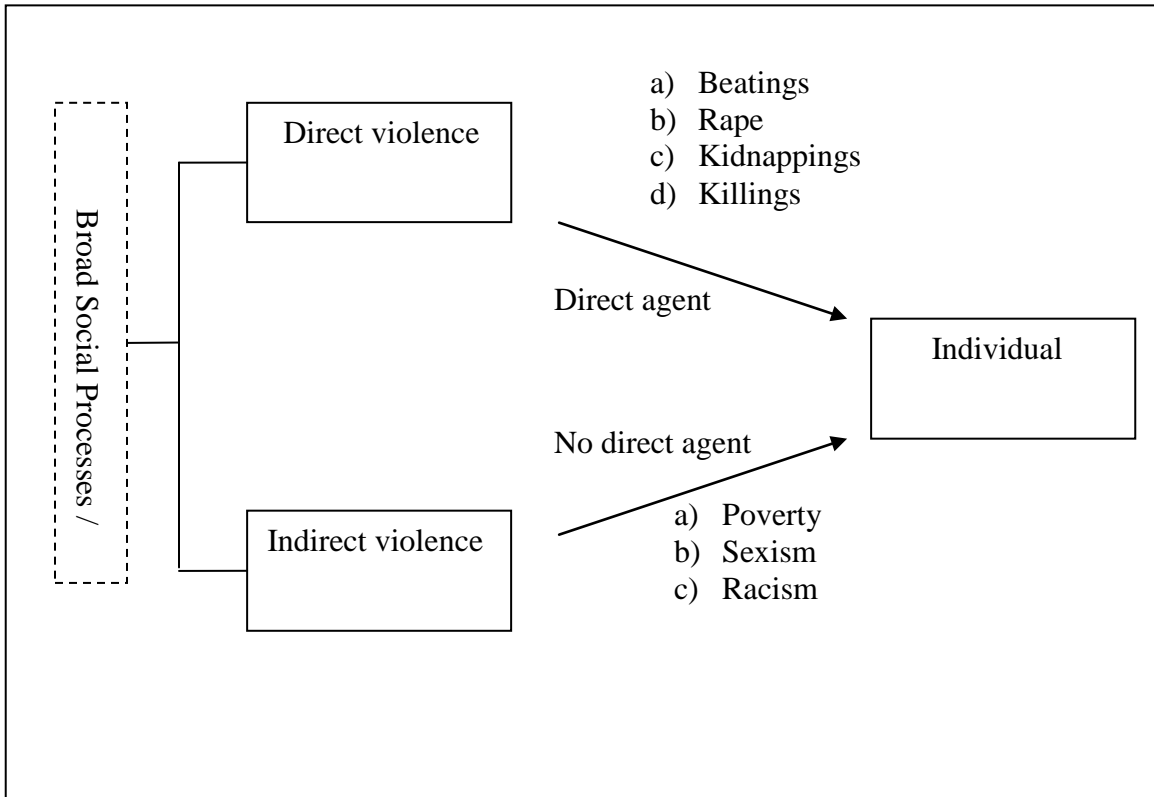
The term structural violence refers to the harm inflicted by the social forces that systematically assault human dignity, constrain agency, and prevent people from meeting their basic needs. First developed by Galtung in 1969, the concept of structural violence has been used to address the toll of social structures such as grinding poverty, racism, and sexism on the most disadvantaged populations of the world. These afflictions are manifested in the highest rates of disease and death, unemployment, homelessness, lack

of education, powerlessness, a shared fate of misery, and the day-by-day violence of hunger, thirst and bodily pain (Kleinman 2000, 227).⁶

The principal distinction put forward by Galtung was the existence of indirect or structural violence. This is the violence that occurs in the absence of a clear “subject” (hereon referred as agent) who perpetrates the violence (170). He argues that even if there is not an agent who commits the violence, “individuals may be killed or mutilated, hit or hurt in both senses of the words, and manipulated by means of stick or carrot strategies” (Ibid). Manifestations of indirect (structural) violence such as poverty, sexism, and racism contrast with forms of direct (personal) violence including beatings, rape, kidnappings, and killings, in that the former is not “visible as action” as in the case of the latter (Ibid). In other words, indirect violence questions the conventional understanding of violence in which an actor actively inflicts harm on a victim. Chart 1 simplifies Galtung’s differentiation between direct and indirect violence and the existence or lack of an agent actively inflicting harm.

Chart 1—A typology of violence

⁶ In line with the concept of structural violence, anthropologists (Scheper-Hughes 1992; Bordieu 1993) use the phrase “the violence of everyday life” to indicate the violence such structural deprivation does to people (Kleinman 2000, 227).



In recent years, Paul Farmer's (2004; 2005) several decade-long work as a physician in the global south has allowed him to make invaluable contributions in evidencing the impacts of structural violence in the lives of his patients. His work has expanded our understanding of structural violence by stressing that violence that occurs in the absence of an agent takes place in an environment where underlying social structures constrain the individual agency of the poorest, and thus puts them at risk of tragic fates such as disease or even political violence (2005, 41). Farmer's study of structural violence has also moved past simply identifying the manifestations of indirect violence, to more comprehensively analyzing the broader—and often global—socio-economic processes that frame both direct and indirect violence (Ibid) (see the dashed box in Chart 1). For instance, in the case of the AIDS epidemic in Haiti's Central Plateau, Farmer traces the abject poverty of a particular community—an important risk factor of HIV/AIDS—to their massive displacement after their land was flooded by the damming of the Artibonite river. Furthermore, unlike Galtung, who disregards the importance of

human agency behind indirect violence (1969, 171), Farmer puts special emphasis on the agents that create such socio-economic structures (2005, 40). Indeed, the project for the Artibonite dam was conceived in the Haitian capital and drafted in Washington D.C. (Ibid, 32).

Thus, Farmer's contributions have expanded the conception of structural violence beyond Galtung's differentiation between direct and indirect violence to a powerful framework that looks at the underlying social structures behind such violence, and explores higher levels of agency and their direct impacts on the experiences of the people holding the bottom echelons of the social pyramid.

3.2 Structural violence in trans-Mexican migration

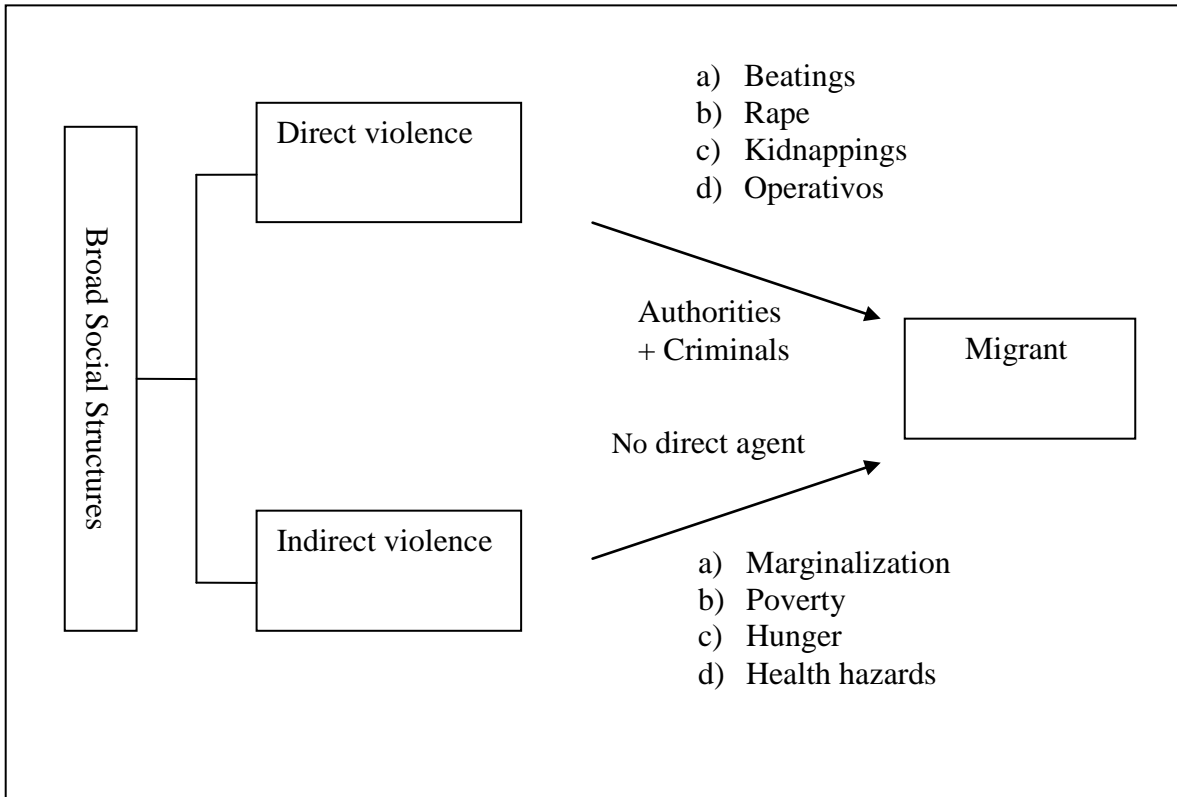
The differentiation between direct and indirect violence helps us gain a broader understanding of the violence that permeates migrants in their path through Mexico. As illustrated by the life-stories of Marilú and Julio in Section 2.2, the violence and suffering of the migrant population crossing through Mexico features important elements of not just direct violence (beatings, rape, kidnappings, killings), but indirect violence (poverty, sexism, racism) as well (see Chart 2).

The direct violence suffered by migrants is perpetrated by authorities and criminals alike. Authorities have been known for being involved in the everyday robbing and extortion of migrants. Even though the Federal Police (PFP) and INM officers are the only authorities that are allowed by law to stop and apprehend migrants, the extortion of migrants is a common practice amongst every branch of Mexico's public security forces. Unfortunately, trans-migrants ignore their rights and privileges and often do not even know who it is that abuses them. In addition to these constant abuses, authorities at the national level are also responsible for the savage beatings by military personnel during the so-called *operativos*. The attempts to stop the moving train in order to capture the hundreds of migrants that travel on the roof top unequivocally lead to a situation of mayhem. Migrants panic and throw themselves before the train even stops while armed forces chase and beat those who try to run away. In the case of Marilú, the fear of getting caught in an *operativo* ultimately resulted in the loss of her right leg.

Moreover, migrants find themselves to be victims of violence perpetrated by criminals along the route to the U.S. The constant passage of migrants and their complete vulnerability makes them an unlimited and un-punishable source of revenue for the criminal world. The criminals taking advantage of the migrants' vulnerability do not fit a specific profile. They can be local citizens, petty thieves, railroad staff, dangerous *maras*,⁷ international drug traffickers, and even other migrants themselves. Although most criminals limit themselves to robbing migrants, beatings, rapes, and kidnappings are also frequent. Criminals can act independently, but most often do so in collusion with authorities (Albergue Belén 2008, 10). For example, it has become common knowledge that the thefts, beatings, and rapes suffered by Julio's travel group around *La Arrochera* take place on a daily basis with the complicity of the authorities working in the road checkpoints. The complicity of both criminals and authorities is even better evidenced in the controversial case of the kidnapping of 16 Guatemalan migrants in January 2007 in Ciudad Ixtepec, Oaxaca. This incident was picked up by news sources when Father Solalinde, coordinator of the migrant shelter in Ixtepec, was beat up by the Police and imprisoned after accompanying the friends and family members of the kidnapped to look for them. It was found out soon after that the kidnapping of these migrants was a joint venture between the kidnapers, the railroad staff, a group of street sellers, the local police, and even higher authorities including Ulises Ruiz, the Governor of the State of Oaxaca (Father Solalinde, personal interview 07/27/08; *Diario Reforma* 01/11/07).

Chart 2—Direct and indirect violence along the migrant route

⁷ '*Mara*' is the colloquial term for Latino gangs which originated in the streets of Los Angeles and have been exported to the rest of Latin America in the past few decades through the United States' massive deportation schemes. *Maras*—most predominantly the *Barrio 18* and the *Mara Salvatrucha*—currently operate in urban centers across Central America, Mexico, and the United States (Lara Klar 2006).



Yet equally as grave as the direct violence perpetrated against migrants is the indirect violence along the route. The indirect violence endured by migrants derives primarily from the constraining of individual agency of the migrant population and their physical marginalization within Mexico’s territory. It is possible to speak of “agency” because their everyday choices as migrants become limited as soon as they set foot in Mexican territory.⁸ As illustrated in the life stories of Marilú and Julio, the constant

⁸ The argument of the constraining of agency of migrants presupposes that going back to their communities is not a real option. Even though people migrate for different reasons (economic, security, political), in every case migrating represents tremendous financial and psychological costs. Many of those who decide to migrate have had to prepare for the journey by borrowing large sums of money (migrants report that smugglers can charge up to six or seven thousand dollars to take a person all the way from Central America into the United States), leaving their children with family members or neighbors, and accepting the inevitability of being subject to grave violence and abuse. This is a particular daunting reality for women who are inherently closer to the children they leave behind, and who have to assume that they will most probably be raped. Thus, the very decision to migrate is a manifestation of desperation and an active rejection of their status quo.

persecution and extortion by authorities, as well as the impossibility of traveling by road constrains the agency of migrants and spatially marginalizes them to the most dangerous and inhospitable areas and means of transport. The constraining of agency and the marginalization of migrants in turn enable other forms of indirect violence that affects migrants such as generalized poverty, hunger, and health hazards (see Chart 2).

In light of the constant assaults that they are subject to, migrants constantly find themselves in a situation of poverty. Any access to income usually depends of occasional money transfers received by those who have friends or relatives helping them migrate, or working odd jobs often in plantations and construction. Yet not all migrants receive financial support from their friends and families. Even those who do, often do not receive any money until they are far in Mexican territory and their probability of reaching the U.S. border is higher. These processes also lead to situations of abuse against migrants. In light of their undocumented status, locals often charge migrants a fee for even retrieving their money at a Western Union branch. The migrants who are hired to work odd jobs are usually severely underpaid or are simply not paid at all once the job is done.

However, the poverty of the migrants goes beyond their lack of money. On the route, migrants live and travel under deplorable conditions and suffer from the inclemencies of the weather. If there is no migrant shelter in their proximities, they sleep on the train tracks or in the wilderness. After several days on the road, most of them have had their clothes stolen or have torn up their shoes. The little clothes they have also tend to be inadequate for the low temperatures endured in the trajectories through the more mountainous parts of the country. Often, their poverty is also manifested in hunger. In some stages of their travels, many go for days without eating.

“We walked for 9 days from the Guatemalan border to Arriaga (Chiapas) to catch the first train. Some locals saw that we were hungry and gave us some food. The rest of the time we picked the *mangos* from the trees. The ones that are left on the trees are unripe so they are bad for you, I’ve had diarrhea for 5 days now. *Qué se le va a hacer si se pasa tanta hambre? (What are you going to do if you’re so hungry?).*”

Nicaraguan migrant 19 years-old

The long duration of the train trips also keeps migrants from eating. Certain stages of the voyage such as Arriaga-Ciudad Ixtepec, or Orizaba-Lechería can take between 12 and 15 hours. The hunger of the migrants during train rides often leads them to sniff glue or drink alcohol, increasing their chances of falling from the train.

Perhaps the most visible manifestations of the indirect violence suffered by migrants are the health hazards of the trajectory. This is evidenced by the trail of crippled migrants left along the railroad tracks, who—like Marilú— have lost their limbs upon falling from the moving train. The considerable number of handicapped people left by the train in fact led to the creation in 1991 of the *Jesús el Buen Pastor* shelter which helps patients with access to prosthetics and psychological support.⁹ Similarly, as in the case of Julio's first trip through Mexico, a considerable number of migrants that pay to be transported by *coyotes* in double floored trailers risk of dying from suffocation. In addition to these frequent tragedies, other less brutal health hazards such as severe dehydration, diarrhea, and deep wounds on the feet affect the great majority of migrants.

⁹ Albergue Jesús del Buen Pastor website: <http://www.alberguebuenpastor.org.mx/>

4. Dynamics of violence in the migrant route and their underlying social structures

Whilst the different manifestations of direct and indirect can be individually identified, it tends to be a combination of both kinds of violence that conform the contours of the migrants' suffering. On the road, the lines separating direct and indirect violence are blurred under the constant weight of hardship. In the life stories of Marilú and Julio we can observe a clear intertwining of forms of direct and indirect violence. When Marilú fell from the train, she was acting in fear of being detained and beaten during an *operativo*. When the women in Julio's travel group were gang raped, they were marginalized to some of the most dangerous paths in the country, places where authorities have at best decided to ignore the brutality taking place.

The intertwining of direct and indirect violence is materialized not only in the adverse events affecting migrants along the route, but in the upholding of impunity and the systematization of abuse. This section on the one hand explores the link between direct and indirect violence, impunity and the systematic perpetration of suffering, and on the other hand analyzes the different underlying social, political, and economic structures that perpetuate this violence.

4.1 Impunity and the systematization of abuse

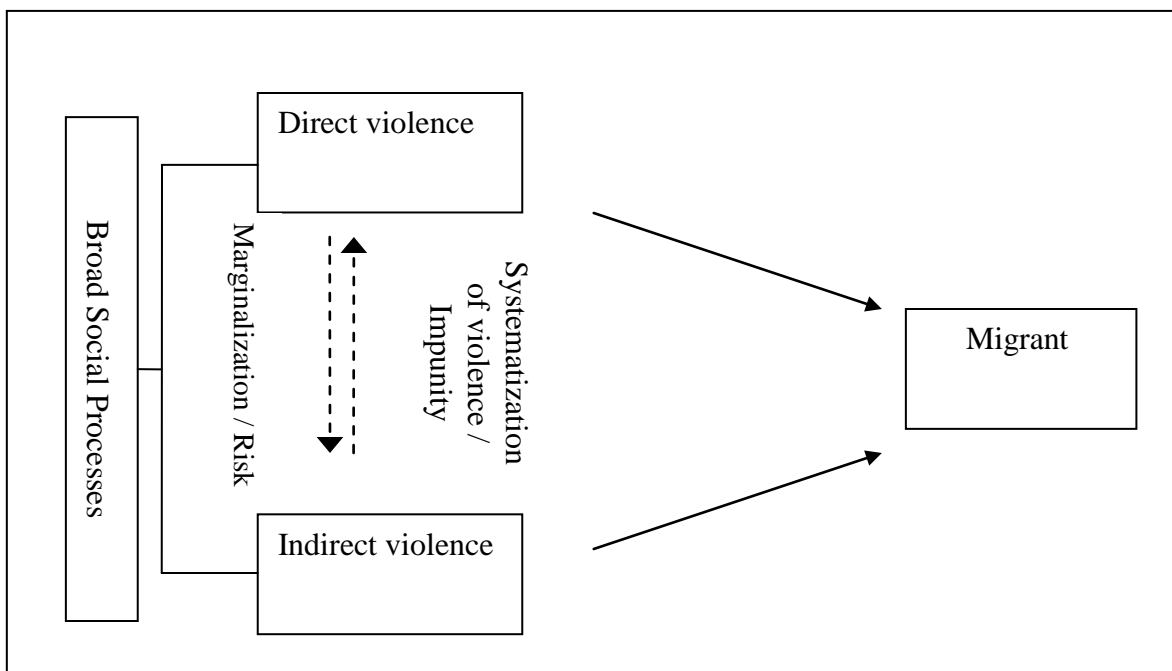
The relationship between direct and indirect violence is illustrative of how structural violence effectively impacts individuals in their everyday life. Galtung (1969) suggests that direct and indirect violence can in theory exist separately but in reality are traced back and derive from one another (178). Farmer (2004) argues that structural violence is embodied as adverse events in the lives of people who live in poverty or are marginalized by racism, gender inequality, or a noxious mix of all of the above (308). In the case of trans-Mexican migration, it becomes clear that the relationship between direct and indirect violence is complex and not necessarily unidirectional.

On the one hand we can observe that not only is indirect violence embodied in the different kinds of direct violence, but it allows for and guarantees the impunity for direct violence to take place (see Chart 3). The marginalization of migrants to a semi-

clandestine world enables any armed person (even just with a machete) to rob, abuse, and even kill migrants without facing any repercussions. This impunity is further upheld by broader social structures such as lack of access to justice which will be touched on in section 4.2. Father Heyman, coordinator of the migrant shelter of Arriaga, Chiapas, labels the impunity of the violence committed against migrants as “Mexico’s license to kill migrants” (personal interview, 06/15/07). In other words, indirect violence serves as the “gatekeeper” for most forms of direct violence affecting migrants. In fact, in some cases it would seem like the Mexican government relies on the perpetuation of indirect violence and the lack of rule of law for migration control purposes. This is clearly exemplified by the decision of the Mexican government not to rebuild the railroad tracks in the state of Chiapas that were destroyed by Hurricane Stan in 2005, and thus take advantage of the violence of that path to serve as a filter for trans-migrants.

On the other hand, it is also possible to observe that the presence of direct forms of violence such as rapes and kidnappings along the route leads migrants to suffer greater degrees of indirect violence. The fear of being subject to abuse by authorities and criminals leads to a greater marginalization and more severe degrees of hunger and health hazards. This trend has been particularly visible in a substantial shift of the migrant flux in the south of Mexico from the densely patrolled and criminal infested Pacific corridor of Chiapas, to the more remote and desolate Atlantic corridor through the state of Tabasco.

Chart 3—Structural violence: impunity and systematization of violence



The intertwining of direct and indirect violence is also materialized in a strong systematization of the abuse against trans-migrants. The constraining of the individual agency of every migrant, their marginalization to the most dangerous paths, and the assured impunity for the perpetrators of such violence makes this violence simply unavoidable. This way, the violence experienced by the hundreds of thousands of migrants that attempt to cross Mexico every year becomes regularized and even expected by both victims and perpetrators (Belén 2008, 11). Indeed, the stories of Julio and Marilú denote an underlying sense of inevitability and powerlessness in the face of their suffering.

The systematic nature of the violence affecting migrants is manifested in its tremendous degrees of focalization along the route. Certain geographical locations have become almost unavoidable foci of abuse. For instance, in the particular case of *La Arrocera*, Julio's story suggests that not a single day goes by without dozens of migrants being robbed, beaten, and raped. I was able to corroborate this by checking the database

of the *Arriaga* shelter which shows that 39 percent of the assaults reported between the 15 of May and the 15 of June of 2007 took place in *La Arrocerá*.

A growing number of recent surveys of the migrant population performed by civil society organizations and academic institutions, which have allowed for more rigorous documentation of the systematic nature of the violence affecting migrants, also evidence a strong focalization of violence along the route. Casillas (2006) shows that out of a thousand people survey performed between April 2005 and March 2006, migrants reported 1,558 human rights violations, which were greatly concentrated in specific points such as San Luís de Potosí, Lechería (Mexico State), Orizaba, Coatzacoalcos (Veracruz), and Ciudad Hidalgo (Chiapas), just to name a few (No page provided). In a similar fashion, the Albergue Belén (2008) of Saltillo Coahuila shows a strong focalization of the 3,294 cases of human rights violations documented between May of 2007 and February of 2008 in the states of San Luís de Potosí, Veracruz, Mexico State, Chiapas, and Tlaxcala.

Table 1—Focal points of violence in the migrant route (in order of incidence)

Casillas (2006)	Albergue Belen (2008)
San Luis de Potosí	San Luis de Potosí
Lechería, Mexico State	Veracruz
Orizaba, Veracruz	Estado de Mexico
Coatzacoalcos, Veracruz	Chiapas
Ciudad Hidalgo, Chiapas	Tlaxcala

However, the strong focalization of abuse along the route has not meant that violence occurs homogenously, but rather that the dynamics of violence are different and distinct throughout the various locations of the migrant trail (Albergue Belén 2008, 13). For example, while in San Luís de Potosí the railroad guards are reported to be the most frequent human rights violators by assaulting migrants and even throwing them off the

trains, the Federal, State and Municipal Police forces are reported for being the main perpetrators of violence in Mexico State.

In analyzing the history of trans-migration, it is also possible to observe that the violence along the route is not static, but constantly adapts to the trends and changes of the migrant flux, and respond to broader socio-political trends. The violence taking place in the state of Chiapas changed dramatically in 2005 when hurricane Stan displaced the departing point of the cargo train by some 300 kilometers. From one day to the next, migrants were forced to walk for several days and go around migration checkpoints. This shift in the migrant route led local criminals to take advantage of their passage through such remote places.

Most recently, an extremely alarming change in the dynamic of violence of the migrant route has been the increasing involvement of the drug traffic cartels in human smuggling and kidnapping migrants across the country. While the most common violence a few years back was perpetrated largely by local criminals and *mareros*, today the exploitation and abuse of migrants has become part the drug trade, of one of the biggest webs of criminality in Mexico and the region. An increasing number of testimonies by migrants are revealing that the *Zetas*, a group of mercenaries which has allegedly taken over the Gulf Cartel, are kidnapping hundreds of migrants everyday along the train tracks. Alexander, a 22 year-old Salvadorian was eager to tell his story to warn the other migrants traveling north:

“I was kidnapped up there in Tierra Blanca (Veracruz) two months ago with dozens of others when we arrived on the train. A group of men with machine guns stopped us and said they were from the *Zeta Group*... There must have been more than 150 migrants kidnapped in the house we were held. They beat you until you give them a phone number. They call your family either in Central America or the U.S. and ask for money. If your family pays, they give you a password on a sheet of paper to show it to the police if you get stopped... and what happens if you can't pay or you don't have family? Well, those who couldn't pay were put in a pick-up truck and driven away, I couldn't tell you if they are dead or not...”

The involvement of the drug traffic is indicative of the dangerously evolving nature of the violence affecting migrants.

4.2 Structures of violence

In light of the important role played by indirect violence as the “gatekeeper” of oppression and the tremendous systematization of violence against trans-Mexican migrants, it is imperative for us to explore the social, economic, and political forces that structure and allow for this violence to take place. To this end, it is possible to distinguish at least eight complimentary and interrelated forces that frame the structures of violence taking place. These are: (i) Mexican migration practices; (ii) Mexico’s historical attitudes concerning migration; (iii) xenophobia against trans-migrants; (iv) the United States’ influence on migration policy; (v) Mexico’s judicial framework; (vi) the increasing presence of the drug trade; (vii) poverty, disenfranchisement, and structures of violence in local populations along the route; and (viii) socio-economic conditions in sending countries.

i. The primary force shaping and influencing the migrant route—and thus the violence within it—has been Mexico’s migration control practices. The Mexican government has never announced an official migration policy towards its southern border or concerning trans-migrants. The closest thing to a coherent policy was a 2005 policy proposal written by the research department of the INM in consultation with civil society members. However, this proposal never gained political momentum within the federal government and was shelved soon after. Nonetheless, its migration control practices have been tremendously effective in impacting the trans-migrant flux. As noted above, the setting up of check points along the highway system automatically limited the migrants’ agency, ultimately driving them out of the public view and marginalizing them to the most dangerous travel routes and means of transportation. It is this physical and geographical marginalization that constrains them to a path where not only manifestations of indirect

violence prevail, but which allows for and guarantees the impunity of the systematic perpetration of direct violence.

ii. Mexico's un-articulated migration policy is itself a product of an important historical baggage. For much of the previous century, Mexico maintained an attitude of selectivity and toleration towards foreigners in their territory. On the one hand Mexico prided itself of being a receptive nation to the great number of European refugees fleeing the turbulent times that characterized the old continent. On the other hand, it was widely tolerant of Guatemalan seasonal workers that provided an inexpensive labor force for coffee plantations mostly in the border state of Chiapas (Rodolfo Casillas, personal interview, 07/14/08). Much of this changed in the 1970s and 1980s when the people knocking on Mexico's door were not white intellectuals or temporary workers, but young poor Central Americans who could not go back to their countries due to military conflict. The Mexican government and many local power brokers regarded the refugee population as a threat to political stability and security (Garcia 2006, 52).

iii. The civil war years and the refugee crisis in Mexico led to a surge of xenophobic attitudes that remain latent throughout Mexican society. Although it is largely illogical and contradictory for Mexicans—the main senders of immigrants to the United States—to look down upon Central Americans crossing their territory, sentiments of xenophobia have been heightened through the constant stigmatization of Central American migrants by the Mexican media, authorities, and local populations. While it is undeniable that there are delinquents amongst the tremendous flux of migrants trying to cross Mexico, the bulk of the migrant population has become stigmatized as *maras*, delinquents, drug-traffickers, and general threats to the public order (Felipe Solis, personal interview 07/20/07).¹⁰ In a study entitled “Crimes against the General Law of Population,” José Jorge Campos Murillo, a former high level official of the General Procurement's office (PGR), states that trans-migrants “provoke insecurity, deaths, prostitution, and corruption every time

¹⁰ Felipe Solis is coordinator of the juridical department at the Center for Human Rights Fray Matias de Córdova (CHRFMC)

that they do something to survive” (CHRFMC website). These xenophobic attitudes have been exacerbated and propagated by local and national media sources through reporting that is based on such stigmas.

This xenophobia is translated into the everyday actions of local populations through which migrants travel. It is common for local transportation services and sellers to take advantage of the vulnerability of the migrants and overcharge them simply based on their nationality. In a number of towns, migrants have also become social scapegoats for the crimes that take place. Xenophobic sentiments have in fact been used by mafias and drug-traffickers to mobilize people against migrant shelters and other human rights groups protecting migrants in a number of places such as Orizaba and Ciudad Ixtepec (Father Solalinde, personal interview 07/27/08).

iv. A more concrete force has been the United States’ mounting pressures on Mexico’s migration practices. As an increasing number of Central Americans in the 1980s started to migrate towards the United States, Mexico was compelled to become actively involved in the detention and deportation of undocumented migrants (Garcia 2006, 69). Since then, the pressure on Mexico has been incessant. Rodolfo Casillas notes that in fact, if one traces all of the US’ immigration reforms since the early 1990s, it is possible to see a corresponding action taken by Mexican authorities with only months of the American decision (personal interview, July 14, 2008). The U.S. interest in a tighter migration control in Mexico has been formalized in a continuous cooperation between the two states. At the beginning of the Fox administration (2000-2006), an \$11 million strategy by the name of *Plan Sur* was conjunctly devised to establish two “migration control belts” around the Isthmus of Tehuantepec in the south of Mexico (Diaz 2001, 7; Casillas 2006, no page provided). The *Plan Sur* would have meant a relocation of the American border to the south of Mexico, thus overtly doing the “dirty work” of the United States and assuming the incalculable human costs that go along patrolling a border (Diaz 2001; 8). Although this plan was brought down by the criticism of human rights activists and civil society members, at least in the construction of these control belts, Mexico has increasingly built up their migration control infrastructure throughout the country. By

2005, the Mexican government had built up to 52 migration detention centers along the migrant route (Casillas 2006, no page provided). This bi-national cooperation has recently reached unprecedented levels through the \$1.4 billion *Plan Mérida* to combat drug trafficking and terrorism. This Plan views Mexico as an entry point for terrorists and thus incriminates trans-migrants as potential terrorists themselves.

v. The constrained agency and the vulnerability of migrants in Mexico has been exacerbated and formalized by the Mexican judicial system. Due to their undocumented status, migrants are completely vulnerable to every form of violence and abuse, as they are not allowed to bring forward any legal claim. The only potential instrument that could be used by migrants to denounce a violation against their human rights is the Ministerio Público (Public Ministry) (Belén 2008, 11). However, this instance is hardly ever used since migrants not only risk being detained and at any point, but because the judicial process is so long and inefficient that it is impossible to for a migrant to afford wait without any certainty of winning their case or being compensated (Felipe Solis, personal interview 07/20/07). The story of Carlos, a middle aged Honduran migrant is telling of this reality:

“Somebody called the police on me when I was suffering from an epileptic seizure. The police thought I was drugged so they beat me so hard that they left me to die in a ditch. After my wounds were healed, the *Albergue* from Tapachula helped me file a claim. Two months after that, the people at the Public Ministry continued to tell me to come next week. I couldn’t wait any longer; I had to continue heading north.”

From an institutional standpoint, there are no judicial entities or instruments that allow for the denunciation of human rights violations perpetrated by civilians (Belén 2008, 11). Only human rights violations perpetrated by government authorities can be denounced through the National Commission for Human Rights (CNDH). However, the effectiveness of the CNDH is questionable at best. While the CNDH has filed a number

of complaints to the INM,¹¹ it has often been unwilling to denounce certain blatant acts of violence such as the beatings taking place in the *operativos*, or the ghastly case of Ernestina Asención, a 70 year-old indigenous woman that died after she was gang raped by military personnel in the state of Veracruz (Father Heyman, personal interview 07/11/07). Furthermore, even when the CNDH has filed a recommendation to higher government authorities, it has not resulted in any sort of investigation or action taken by the competent authorities. Not even the CNDH's recommendation after the beating and imprisonment of Father Solalinde in Ciudad Ixtepec was followed up by any form of official investigation.

vi. The violence suffered by migrants has become increasingly affected by the presence of the drug traffickers along the migrant route and their involvement in the kidnapping and smuggling of migrants. Like petty criminals, *maras*, and authorities, the drug-cartels have begun taken advantage of the lawlessness and corruption of the migrant route. While the drug traffic has conceivably had historical ties with human smuggling webs, migrants and human rights activists are reporting unprecedented levels of involvement of drug cartels in the daily kidnappings of migrants (El Universal 04/16/08). As noted in Alexander's testimony above, the kidnapers in Tierra Blanca and in several other locations along the migrant route belong to the so-called *Zeta Group*, armed faction of the drug cartel allegedly composed by former special operation personnel of the Mexican army. The increasing use of the migrant route for the transportation of drugs and the incorporation of kidnappings and human smuggling in the activities of the drug cartel will continue to heighten the violence suffered by migrants as well as the levels of corruption and impunity by Mexican authorities. This involvement of the drug cartels is of course not incidental but a result of larger socio-political processes affecting the drug-traffic such as the continuous American-based demand for narcotics, and the recently US-sponsored Mexican war on drugs and terrorism put in place through the *Plan Mérida* (Belén 2008, 12).

¹¹ The CNDH filed 278 complaints to the INM in 2006 (Casillas 2006)

vii. The violence affecting trans-migrants takes place within greater structures of violence in Mexico. The vast majority of the towns through which the migrant route crosses are characterized by their poverty and lawlessness. This poverty, disenfranchisement, and violence of these places are indisputable factors in the reproduction of the structures of violence affecting trans-migrants. Albeit the geographical position of the states of Chiapas and Oaxaca play an important role in making them a prime setting for the rampant violence suffered by migrants, it is not coincidental that they are also the two poorest states in the entire country (PNUD 2004, 25). It is only logical that amongst the poorest and most forgotten people in Mexico, local inhabitants and authorities will seek to take advantage of a more vulnerable and powerless population. A contrary argument could be made by noting that some of the main perpetrators of this violence are authorities, and therefore relatively powerful people. While this is certainly true, the fact that the local policemen of Ciudad Ixtepec have to pay out of their own pocket to rent out a police vehicle is telling of greater structures of poverty and disenfranchisement of some of these populations, even of their authorities (Father Solalinde, personal interview 07/27/08). Moreover, the structures of violence affecting local populations are not limited to their poverty, but are manifested in high levels lawlessness, corruption, impunity, and the absence of a rule of law. What determines the existence of these structures? The fact that Ciudad Ixtepec, one of the most important foci of violence in the migrant route, houses over 10,000 armed soldiers is indicative of the inexistence of an easy answer. This way, the structures of violence affecting local populations also weigh heavily in the perpetuation of the violence against migrants

viii. The violence and suffering of the migrant route is connected not only to the structural violence of local populations in Mexico, but also to the very hardships affecting these migrants in their home countries. Although local conditions in sending countries are not a direct cause of the violence along the migrant route, they are indirectly related as these are the conditions that force people to migrate in the first place. Although

explaining the motives behind migration is a complex endeavor that transcends the scope of this paper, they are generally associated with adverse economic conditions and lack of opportunities. For instance, in dozens of interviews with El Salvadorian migrants, a constant source of hardship cited is the impact of the 2001 dollarization which substantially reduced the purchasing power of the poorest sectors of the population. “With the dollar, the fertilizer prices are up to \$60 per bag. I can only get \$180 for what I grow with that,” affirms 37 year-old Marcos. However, economic factors do not give the full picture. Other common reasons for migrating include street violence, as illustrated in the life story of Julio, and natural disasters. The substantial impact of natural disasters is exemplified by the tremendous rise in the migrant flux after the devastation caused by Hurricane Mitch 1998 (Castillo 2000, 16).

These complementary forces shape and perpetuate the dynamics of violence along the migrant route. Of course, some of these forces weigh more heavily than others in the entrenchment and systematization of the violence affecting migrants. Nonetheless, it is essential to take into account the entirety of these structures in order to fully understand the intricacies of the migrant route, explore the levels of agency and responsibility behind these abuses, and ultimately allow for a coherent and “humane” proposition of migration control policies. After all, can Mexico’s migration control authorities sincerely say that their policies are “humane” under the present regime of marginalization and structural violence? Can the impunity of the violence perpetrated against migrants be corrected without providing them with access to justice? Can trans-migration be adequately addressed without taking into account the shifts of the violence affecting migrants, mainly the involvement of the drug-traffic in the extortion and kidnapping of migrants? Can people be deterred from migrating under the current situation of poverty and insecurity in the hemisphere? These are but a few questions that call for trans-Mexican migration to be treated through a lens of structural violence.

V. Final Remarks

This paper has argued that the afflictions experienced by trans-Mexican migrants needs to be understood as a case of structural violence. This approach allowed us to grasp the complexities and the dynamics of the violence encountered in the migrant route such as the different kinds of violence afflicting migrants, its systematic perpetration, and the social structures that hold this systems of oppression in place. Through the life stories of Julio and Marilú, which are representative of the suffering of thousands of trans-Mexican migrants, we observe how the constraining of agency and the physical marginalization of migrants are crucial elements in allowing for the systematic perpetuation of both direct and indirect violence. The case of trans-Mexican migration also sheds light on the role of indirect violence as a perpetuator for direct violence and a guarantor for the impunity of its perpetrators. Moreover, in looking at the patterns of the focalization of violence along the route, we perceive that the dynamics of violence are different from place to place and that they constantly evolve and adapt to changes in the migrant flux and to broader socio-political trends.

The task of understanding the violence of the migrant route has also contributed in exploring how structures of violence are constructed around trans-migrants as a particular social group. Admittedly, this is an un-orthodox application of the structural violence framework. Unlike most pieces written by “anthropologists of suffering”¹² which look broadly at groups or people “who belong to the lowest social strata” as the object of inquiry (Kleinman 2000, 226), this paper looks at a group which dwells in a geographically constrained universe within society. Thus, they are trapped in a parallel machinery of oppression from that affecting the poorest and most disenfranchised of Mexican citizens. The implications of the existence of this parallel structure of violence are noteworthy. The complete powerlessness of trans-Mexican migrants derived from their physical marginalization and their inability to access justice opens up the machinery of oppression for anyone that wants to partake. Everyone—from a poor villager, to a

¹² See Schepper-Hughes 1992; Farmer 2005.

power-thirsty policeman, to some of the most-dangerous drug-traffickers in the world— can take their share of profit from the violence suffered by trans-migrants. This way, the structural violence affecting trans-migrants links up as escape valve for other parallel structures of violence.

This paper is a small contribution in understanding the dynamics of trans-Mexican migration, a human tragedy that has been largely ignored. Further research needs to be conducted on the impact of the increasing violence affecting trans-Mexican migrants on their perceptions of migration as a feasible response to the pervasive poverty in their home countries. More importantly, this analysis of the violence of the migrant route needs to be factored in the elaboration of any integral migration policy in Mexico. Furthermore, the study of trans-migration can be analyzed comparatively with other countries of the world where migrants transit before reaching their final destination. This will only become a larger social phenomenon as the world becomes both increasingly interconnected and an increasingly unequal place both within and across countries.

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