

# From Ecuador to Elsewhere

## The (Re)Configuration of a Transit Country

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■ **ABSTRACT:** Unlike other transit countries, Ecuador's position as a transit country has just begun to be publicly addressed, having been more of a strategic public secret than a topic of public interest. Based on 12 months of ethnographic fieldwork conducted between 2015 and 2016, this article discusses the dynamics of the (re)configuration of Ecuador as a transit country used by both immigrants and Ecuadorean deportees mainly from the United States to reach other destinations. It argues that this process should be interpreted in light of a series of historical and political elements in tension. The article suggests that the subtle presence of the United States' externalized border, together with national political inconsistencies, have a repressive as well as a productive effect, which has functioned to produce a systemic form of selective control of transit mobility.

■ **KEYWORDS:** externalized border policies, freedom of movement, irregularized transit migration, postneoliberal leftist regimes, universal citizenship

Ecuador has a complex history with respect to the movement of people across its borders. For at least the past five decades, irregularized Ecuadoreans have been emigrating abroad, mainly to the United States of America (henceforth US).<sup>1</sup> Likewise, during the past three decades, the country has received immigrants and refugees (mostly Colombians), while being a transit country used by immigrants on their way to other destinations, and by Ecuadorean deportees mainly from the US to recommence their transit north.

In consonance with its own migratory history and with the advent of a leftist new regime—the Citizens' Revolution (CR) government—in 2008, Ecuador embraced one of the most progressive constitutions worldwide in migratory matters. Its constitutional principles of “universal citizenship and free mobility,” of “equality between foreigners and nationals,” its commitment to safeguard “the right to seek asylum,” and to meet the “gradual elimination of the difference between nationals and foreigners” (Articles 40, 41, and 416), were consistent with a turn toward a “postneoliberal” regime. After coming to power, the CR government also adopted a firm national sovereign rhetoric, rejecting any possible US interference in national matters (Pugh 2017), and a firm stance against the global border regime is reflected in its constitutional principles.

The adoption of the cutting-edge constitution was not matched, however, by corresponding changes in migration law. Ecuador's 1971 migratory law, issued under a dictatorial regime, remained in effect until January 2017. In fact, the ambiguous coexistence of a reformist constitution with a repressive law, together with the mismatch of corresponding progressive policy implementation, has directly augmented the rate of irregularized migration in Ecuador. The constitution's promise of “free mobility” and “universal citizenship” has attracted immigrants



and asylum seekers from nearby countries, such as Cubans, Haitians, and Dominicans, and others from far away, such as Syrians, Iraqis, Nigerians, Sudanese, and Ghanaians. However, clear inconsistencies between that promise and their everyday lives in Ecuador have driven them to transit through the country to other destinations.

The enactment of the new Ecuadorean Organic Law of Human Mobility in January 2017 filled a void by “regulating” the rights of and duties toward migrants and attempting to harmonize migration legislation with the constitution. For the first time, the new legislation explicitly recognized that Ecuador is a transit country, to the extent that people in transit are now protected under the new law (Article 1). Although Ecuador’s historical condition as a transit country was openly acknowledged recently (Álvarez Velasco 2016; Correa 2014; Mena 2010; Wells 2013), the socio-economic and political dynamics around irregularized transit of both Ecuadoreans and international migrants from Ecuador to elsewhere have remained a sort of “public secret,” which, in Michael Taussig’s terms, means information that is “known, but cannot be spoken” due to power relations and particular political and economic interests at stake. For him, a “public secret” is defined too as “knowing what not to know, where not to look and what not to see” (Taussig 1999: 50). As will be explained below, the existence of a clandestine, highly profitable business built around irregularized transit of both Ecuadoreans and international migrants to the US, which has become a source of illicit enrichment for multiple actors in Ecuador for at least the past five decades, clearly illustrates why a public secret has been built around Ecuador’s transit condition.

Unlike Mexico, Turkey, or Morocco (Basok et al. 2016; Collyer 2007; İçduygu and Yükker 2012), the case of Ecuador as a transit country has not been widely recognized or studied. By analyzing how and why Ecuador has become a transit country, this article makes a contribution to the field of transit migration studies with findings and reflections from a case that has received scant attention. I argue that the (re)configuration of Ecuador as a transit country should be analyzed in light of a series of historical and political processes in tension. On the one hand is Ecuador’s historical migratory pattern and its interrelationship with the United States’ externalized southern border policy (on the latter see also Vogt, this volume). On the other hand, clear political inconsistencies exist between: (1) a progressive constitution and a repressive law; (2) a firm national sovereign rhetoric and ongoing subtle cooperation with the US to control irregularized transit; and (3) the promise of “free mobility” and “universal citizenship” and latent socioeconomic constraints that directly affect everyday lives of immigrants and Ecuadorean deportees living in Ecuador. The confluence of these contradictory processes has provoked continuous transit to other destinations.

In the first section I provide an overview of my theoretical and methodological approaches. Then I explain how Ecuador’s migratory history determines its role as a transit country. A description of the current transit dynamics throughout Ecuador allows me to propose in the third section a critical analysis of the abovementioned inconsistencies and of migrants’ responsiveness in activating their transit projects. In the conclusion, I delve deeper into the social and political functionality that the public secret built around Ecuador’s condition as a transit country has had during the past decades. This final argument will allow me to suggest that this migratory condition has a dual repressive and productive effect, which has shaped a systemic form of selective control of transit mobility within the Americas.

## **Transit Countries: Between Mobility and Control**

My conceptual point of departure is the process of production of space, or the relational socio-spatial conflicts that produce a particular space (Lefebvre [1974] 1991). This means focusing

on power relations to understand how they produce and transform space. By delving into the dynamics around irregularized transit migration, I analyze how the unresolved tension between this type of migration and the geopolitics of mobility (Hyndman 2004) has turned Ecuador into a transit country.

Exploring transit migration is a path to unveiling “constellations of mobility” and the “politics of mobility” enmeshed in that movement (Cresswell 2010: 19). Transit migration, as a form of human mobility, is a strategic response to the constantly changing violent neoliberal border regime (Düvell 2014: 218). Far from being passive subjects or victims, transit migrants are constantly activating strategies to challenge and negotiate state forms of control, while reconfiguring their migratory and life projects (Mezzadra 2010; Papadopoulos et al. 2008).

Another key element, as highlighted by William Walters (2010) and Sandro Mezzadra and Brett Neilson (2013), is that, since at least the 1990s, the externalization of borders has been a control mechanism of unequal power relations between destination countries, or central economies, which externalize their border control; and shield countries, mostly peripheral economies, which internalize that control as part of major cooperation agreements on economic, political, and security matters (Bigo 2002; Menjívar 2014). This process has occurred mainly at the southern fringes of the European Union and the United States, the main initiators and facilitators of the turn toward the global border regime (De Genova et al. 2015). The defining characteristics of border zones and of the transit countries they comprise is that they are spaces of dispute configured by multiple actors who always operate in between legality and illegality. Transit countries are transnational spaces where the infrastructures of mobility, including physical and digital infrastructure (Gillespie et al. 2016), operate to ensure the movement of labor power and commodities while simultaneously interconnecting centers and peripheries within the capital accumulation process (Walters 2010). Therefore, the nodal tension between mobility and geopolitics is the main force producing transit countries as part of extended border zones (Collyer and King 2015). As Antje Missbach and Melissa Phillips describe (this volume), transit countries should be understood as “constructed and contested” transnational spaces. For this reason, they are produced as part of the global neoliberal order where the externalization of border control is a key mechanism, as well as local rationalities taking place in transit states. In the case of Ecuador, as I will show, just as the externalization of the US border southward has been a determinant historical factor in this spatial production, the same is true for its own socioeconomic conditionalities together with its paradoxical migratory policies.

As soon as I began my fieldwork, a complex methodological puzzle regarding Ecuador’s transit condition arose that materialized in three empirical constellations. First, as mentioned earlier, there was minimal academic work on the topic, and the existing research, beyond analyzing routes and nationalities in transit, did not necessarily provide a historical and political analysis of Ecuador’s transit condition (Álvarez Velasco 2018). Investigative journalism, conversely, made a much larger contribution. Yet, this type of information was also characterized by limitations. Based on the historical press review I conducted, which I detail below, I confirmed that newspaper articles on this topic appeared with much more frequency around the year 2008, when the Ecuadorean progressive turn in migration matters took place, and that date was socially set, at least in the media coverage, as a sort of foundational date of Ecuador’s transit condition (see *El Universo* 2008). This contributed to a social construction of this migratory condition as if was a very recent “novelty,” or a direct outcome of the new constitution, leaving aside its recognition as a social and political process with “historical thickness” (Bredeloup and Pliez 2005: 2), as is actually the case. Additionally, all too frequently, those articles proliferated in the midst of controversial contexts, for instance, when police raids to dismantle smuggling networks took place,

using a biased, sensationalist approach that overemphasized the “irregularized” character of this type of migration (Álvarez Velasco 2018).

Second, the social and state actors I interviewed, beyond insisting on the “novelty” of Ecuador’s transit condition, barely provided any other details about *who* transit migrants were, *where* they come from, *why* and *how* they reached Ecuador, or *why* they left it for other destinations, nor did they offer any historical, social, or political details about this migratory condition. At first glance, it seemed to me that, although people knew that international migrants transited from Ecuador to elsewhere, their presence passed unnoticed—a situation that is very different from other well-known transit countries where transit migration is openly debated. Among my interviewees, there were a few exceptions, particularly in the cases of officials working directly with migrants either in public institutions or in social organizations. That was the case of the then director of the Human Mobility Management Unit of the Provincial Government of Pichincha,<sup>2</sup> who made the following reflection regarding transit migration:

Apparently people on the streets, but also public officers, know little about transit migration. To be frank, I am suspicious about this. Of course it is known! Two things to say: First, there are too many interests around it, money-wise speaking, “illegal” transit migration yields good money, everybody knows that, so it’s much better to keep silent. Don’t you think? Second, from a state-centric perspective, it is “comfortable” not “knowing,” for it justifies not acting properly against transit migrants to protect their rights, to fulfill our constitution. (Director of the Human Mobility Management Unit of the Provincial Government of Pichincha, Quito, January 2016)

The attuned reflections made by the then director provided a key analytical insight for me: the “reduced knowledge” is not only “suspicious,” as she states, but functional in state and social terms. The public secret precisely consists in simultaneously knowing and “ignoring”—or keeping a social secret—regarding the dynamics at work in Ecuador’s transit condition, because they perform diverse social and political functions, as I will show throughout this article.

Third, between 2007 and 2017, the CR government positioned Ecuador in the global spotlight as a progressive country where Ecuadorean constitutional principles in migration matters overtly confronted the current global border regime. In the national official rhetoric, migrants were seen as victims of that regime, which turned them into “illegal human beings” (SENAMI 2007).<sup>3</sup> A firm rhetoric of sovereignty in national matters was adopted in tandem (Pugh 2017), which was reflected not only in official national documents but also in public statements made by the then president Rafael Correa.

These three empirical clusters were part of the puzzle I faced, confirming that because it remained a public secret, at first glance it appeared that transit migration was not a phenomenon in Ecuador. From a political viewpoint, with such a progressive constitution in migratory matters and a postneoliberal government, it seems that there is no place either for migratory restrictions or for any direct influence by US externalized border policies, both of which are key elements for understanding the configuration of countries of transit in the region. However, beyond the image of a progressive country in migratory matters promulgated by Ecuador, a public secret concealed a complex historical and contemporary dynamic of power relations, inconsistencies, and disputes with regard to irregularized transit. Through my fieldwork I was able to peel back the layers of this complex dynamic and decode the conflicting relations between mobility and geopolitics and the subtle impact of the United States’ externalized border on Ecuador.

Besides the empirical puzzle, finding transit migrants, both immigrants and Ecuadorean deportees, was not straightforward. Faced with this methodological problem, I identified cities where I conducted 12 months of ethnographic fieldwork between 2015 and 2016: Quito,

Ecuador's capital city and main urban receiver of migrants; Cuenca, Azogues, Gualaceo, and Chordeleg, which are urban localities in the migrant-sending southern provinces of Ecuador where Ecuadorean deportees usually arrive from the US; and Tulcán, a northern Ecuadorean city located close to the border with Colombia. Deploying a different strategy in each city to find central places where migrants and deportees congregated, I met 20 transit migrants whose migratory trajectories I reconstructed. This meant retracing their past movements from their countries of origin to Ecuador, and understanding why they decided to move from Ecuador to elsewhere. Sixteen of the 20 migrants were from Syria, Iraq, Nigeria, Sudan, Zimbabwe, Cuba, Haiti, and the Dominican Republic who lived in dispersed neighborhoods in central and northern Quito with compatriots, or stayed briefly in Tulcán before continuing their journey to Colombia. The other four were Ecuadorean deportees from the US whom I met in Cuenca, Azogues, Gualaceo, and Chordeleg.

The arguments I put forward arise from a qualitative research approach that combined participant observation, in-depth interviews, and informal conversations in English and Spanish with approximately 180 local actors, an exploration of the digital spaces created by migrants, and a review of press coverage in Ecuadorean and international newspapers. For this matter, I researched the digital archives, from the 1970s to 2016, of *El Comercio*<sup>4</sup> in Quito and digital press reports from newspapers and magazines from Ecuador, the US, Mexico, Colombia, and Panama. Among the 180 people I interviewed were state agents, ambassadors, border agents, members of local NGOs and international organizations working in migration affairs, local priests, journalists, human rights lawyers, migration scholars, and local residents, who all participated voluntarily. For security reasons, migrants' names have been changed. An ethical consideration must be mentioned related to conducting any ethnography with irregularized migrants in transit. In our face-to-face conversations and in our virtual dialogues, they revealed confidential information about tactics, strategies, routes, and forms of negotiation to reach Ecuador, to survive there in irregularized conditions, and to eventually depart from there. I have respected throughout what they wanted me to reveal or not.

### Looking Back: Ecuador as a Transit Country

Since the middle of the twentieth century, Ecuador has been providing labor power mainly to the US, but also to Europe (Kyle 2000). With an estimated 1.5 to 3 million Ecuadoreans, or 10 percent of the country's total population, currently living outside the country, Ecuador is most often seen as a migrant-sending country (IOM 2017). Yet, alongside emigration, Ecuador is also a transit country. However, this fact has received scarce media, policy, and academic attention, except for a few national and international press reports and a limited number of academic studies (Arcentales and Garbay 2012; Bravo 2014; Mena 2010; Ruíz and Álvarez Velasco 2016). Moreover, based on my fieldwork findings, I can assert that Ecuador's historical status as a transit country seemed to remain a "public secret" (following Taussig 1999: 50). Yet, this public secret has been exposed in certain junctures, or when delving into subtle social everyday dynamics. Two illustrative examples of this arise from my fieldwork.

First, a so-called migratory crisis erupted in the summer of 2016 and made Ecuador's condition as a transit country a topic of public debate. In that "crisis," around nine thousand irregularized migrants—mostly Cubans, but also Haitians and thousands from African countries—set out on clandestine pathways over land from Ecuador to the US (Álvarez Velasco 2016). During that "crisis," Ecuador's condition as a transit country was positioned in political and media terms as a novelty. Headlines such as "Andean Countries Turned into Transit Countries for Migrants"

(*El Telégrafo* 2016) or “Ecuador Is Used to Move Migrants” (Bravo 2014) appeared in national newspapers, and even then president Rafael Correa stated that “we will not turn into a coyote country [smugglers’ country]. We will not allow Ecuador to become a passage for smuggling and trafficking people” (*El Universo* 2016). Yet, far from being a novelty, as I will explain, being a transit country dates back decades.

Second, when delving into everyday social dynamics, oral accounts made it clear that the historical configuration of Ecuador as a transit country goes back over 40 years. Residents and state officials living in the Ecuador-Colombia border region confirmed this. The testimony of Norberto, a 63-year-old man I met while traversing the Ecuador-Colombia border, is a clear example: “I have been working as a taxi driver for more than 30 years. I know this border. I have seen people from China, Africa, and the Middle East, during these years. They do not stay, they move on. I have also known Ecuadoreans that have left. Some in their third or fourth attempt. All of them, foreigners and nationals, heading to the US.” Norberto’s perceptions concurred with migrant accounts. For instance, Iraqi and Nigerian migrants in Quito told me that, as part of the migratory knowledge amassed in their communities, they knew in advance that Ecuador had been a crossing point on migratory routes from their countries toward the US for decades. The testimony of Edu, a 28-year-old Nigerian migrant in transit to the US, illustrates this: “The travel took its time. My cousin was among the first travelers who departed a couple of decades ago. When I decided to emigrate, I contacted him and he taught me how to do it. He flew from Nigeria to Ecuador. He stayed here for a couple of months, or years, I am not so sure, until he was able to move to the US. Now, I am following his journey.” According to immigrants’ testimonies, Ecuador’s geographical position, the existence of smuggling networks, and the limited control over its borders together explained its historical role as a strategic crossing point on transcontinental routes. I corroborated this perception when reviewing press coverage. For instance, in 2003, in a trial in the US of an Iranian snakehead (leader) of a clandestine network that smuggled migrants from Jordan, Iraq, Palestine, and Egypt to the US via Ecuador, a historical dynamic was uncovered. In that trial, the US Citizenship and Immigration Services found that, from at least the late 1970s, Ecuador had been a sort of “mecca of illegal migration,” as mentioned by one of the US immigration agents during that trial, where smuggling networks operated virtually without any control (Arrillaga and Rodríguez 2005; Santos 2004).

Just as migrants have historically transited through Ecuador to the US assisted by smuggling networks, so too have Ecuadoreans, in particular deportees who recommence their routes up north. In the city of Azogues in the province of Cañar, one of the main historical sources of migrants to the United States, I met Humberto, a 76-year-old resident, who explained: “Coyotes [smugglers] used to carry a lot of US dollars in their pockets from fetching and carrying migrants. I remember that migrants, as they left to the north, they came back here. Some of them were deportees, and some others were migrants that simply decided to return. They used to easily come and go. This has been happening for years.” This ongoing situation needs to be understood in light of Ecuador’s history of migration to the US. Despite its geographical distance from Ecuador and its increasingly strengthened border regime, the US has been the principal destination for emigrants from Ecuador for at least the past five decades. It is no coincidence that by 2016 there were approximately 715,000 Ecuadoreans living in the US (US Census-American Community Survey 2016).

The long history of irregularized migration derives from a reinforced visa regime and its expansion southward. Mexico, Guatemala, El Salvador, and Costa Rica have not only imposed visa requirements on Ecuadoreans, but, as part of bilateral cooperation mechanisms, also authorize the entrance of any foreigner without a visa if they hold a valid visa for the US. Thus, migratory controls that directly affect the free movement of Ecuadoreans have been adopted in the

region, while in tandem informal mechanisms have been created. During the past five decades, smuggling networks have facilitated the irregularized movement of Ecuadoreans to the US, configuring a highly profitable industry around irregularized transit migration that operates between legality and illegality (Stone-Cadena and Álvarez Velasco 2018).

My ethnographic evidence confirms the historical configuration of Ecuador as a transit country for both migrants and Ecuadorean deportees. So why has it been a public secret that only recently has become a matter of public interest? Again, local knowledge yields some clues. As the then director of the Unit of Public Safety and Equality of the Municipality of Tulcán stated,

Irregularized transits have always taken place in this border. But, as this is an illegal activity, little is spoken about it, and almost nothing has been done. Ecuadorean migrants or foreigners traverse the actual checkpoint or they cross blind spots, and they do it via illegal paths. We know that, but there are many economic interests involved, and even functionaries who have benefited from it. (Director of the Unit of Public Safety and Equality of the Municipality of Tulcán, Tulcán, September 2016)

If “little is spoken,” as the then director asserted, this is because transit migration has become a source of illicit enrichment for multiple actors, including illegalized, state, and social actors. Because of this, people “know what not to know, where not to look and what not to see,” echoing Taussig (1999), regarding irregularized transits.

### **Springboard to Continental Destinations**

Similar to other transit countries, acquiring data on the trends of transit migration is not an easy task, but it is possible to use indirect and informal sources to come up with rough approximations.

When analyzing the net migration rate between 2010 and 2014, it is possible to confirm that some Caribbean, African, and Middle Eastern countries of origin show imbalances between the number of entries and departures. It can be inferred that the remaining migrants either stayed irregularly in Ecuador or departed elsewhere. For example, migrants from Cuba (net positive migration rate of 25,331), Haiti (29,373), the Dominican Republic (2,797), China (8,618), India (1,928), and Senegal (3,332), among others.<sup>5</sup> The Ministry of Interior of Colombia, on the other hand, reports that since 2012, irregularized migrants from China, Bangladesh, Cuba, India, and Pakistan have been detained, typically traveling from Ecuador (UNODC and Migración Colombia 2015). Likewise, the Migratory Policy Unit of the Mexican Ministry of Interior confirms that between 2014 and 2015 the number of Asian migrants detained increased by 89 percent and that of African migrants by 180 percent (Ureste 2016). The independent newspaper *Animal Político* revealed that the majority of those migrants had transited from Ecuador to Mexico (Ureste 2016). Regarding Ecuadorean deportees who possibly recommence their transit journeys north, the only information is data from Ecuador’s Directorate of Attention and Protection of Ecuadoreans Abroad in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Human Mobility: between January 2012 and June 2016, 7,577 Ecuadoreans were deported from the US.

Empirical evidence from fieldwork provides further insights. Six out of the 20 migrants whose trajectories I reconstructed were women. Their ages ranged between 20 to 61 years; 19 of them had finished high school, and 16 were professionals; only two entered Ecuador via irregularized paths, with the rest using their passports to enter, but becoming irregular once their tourist visas expired. They entered the country by different means. Ecuadorean deportees arrived from the US by plane. After staying for a couple of weeks or months in Ecuador, depending on their financial resources, they planned to either follow the route from Ecuador to Colom-

bia through Central America and Mexico to the US, guided by smugglers or by information on their smartphones, or to travel by air via Nicaragua or Honduras and then continue overland. Migrants from Syria, Iraq, Sudan, and Nigeria arrived by plane from their home countries. They usually entered South America via Brazil, a country without any visa restrictions, and then some of them continued their journey by plane to Quito. Others, after arriving in Brazil, continued their journey on foot clandestinely until they reached Ecuador's border with Peru; this was the path taken by some Cubans, by Ghanaians, and by Cameroonians. Migrants from other African countries, paying no less than USD 2,000, embarked on a sea journey usually from South Africa until they reached either a Brazilian port and continued on foot to Ecuador, or an Ecuadorean port directly. Finally, other migrants, such as Cubans, Haitians, or Dominicans, arrived directly by plane from their home countries and entered Ecuador regularly. Far from being impoverished, irregularized migrants supposedly linked to transnational organized crime networks, as the press reports published on Ecuadorean media usually portrays them, transit migrants are diverse and not inexorably linked to irregularity.

Transiting is not always a prefigured migratory project, but one that unfolds depending on contextual contingencies. Of the 20 migrants who took part in my research, four migrants and four deported Ecuadoreans arrived in Ecuador with the intention of transiting toward the US. The remaining 12 were attracted to Ecuador by the promise of "free mobility" and "universal citizenship" and by its dollarized economy. In the first instance, they intended to reside in Ecuador, perhaps temporarily, but, as will be noted below, Ecuador's inconsistent policies and harsh socioeconomic conditions have boosted transit migration, mostly in the direction of the US, but also to other continental destinations such as Chile (for the Haitian or Dominican cases) and Argentina (for the Nigerian, Cameroonian, and Senegalese cases), desired destinations because of their socioeconomic conditions and the existence of social networks for migrants.

In tandem with its historical formation, Ecuador's present (re)configuration as a transit country needs to be understood in light of the convergence of global and national conditions. The proliferation of military and socioeconomic conflicts, together with the strengthening of "fortress Europe," have meant that migrants and asylum seekers have had to take divergent migration paths. Danah, a 38-year-old Syrian woman, stated: "Before our departure to Ecuador, my cousin went to Turkey and paid to cross the sea. She got to Europe, but she is traumatized and sick. I am not out of my mind. I was escaping the war in Syria. I did not want to expose my girl and my old mom to another sort of battle, a battle at sea, with a high risk of dying, just for the sake of going to Europe." Like Danah, other migrants I met in Quito asserted that having no money, proper documents, or visas was not the main problem in trying to reach Europe; the main problem, as they saw it, was violence along the route. Given this threat, they reconfigured their migratory projects toward countries that had no visa restrictions, such as Ecuador. Many used digital tools such as Visa Mapper<sup>6</sup> and other online sources in selecting Ecuador as a destination. Through the testimonies of my interviewees, I concluded that even though they had minimal knowledge about Ecuador as a country, what was widely known was the fact that when they arrived in Ecuador, they would be granted a 90-day tourist visa (Visa 12-X).

Ecuador's geographical position could also facilitate further transit through Central America to the US. As one migrant told me: "Ecuador is located in America, the same continent where America [the US] is, so it seemed to be easy to move up north" (26-year-old Syrian interviewee).

The transit of international migrants to Ecuador, and the restarting of Ecuadorean deportees' journeys north, should therefore be seen as a strategic response to the neoliberal global border regime and its increasingly strict migration legislation (Düvell 2014). Political inconsistencies in national migratory policies, on the other hand, are key additional elements to explain the current proliferation of irregularized transits from Ecuador to elsewhere. I now turn to this analysis.



## Between Political Inconsistencies: The Boom in Transit Migration

Clear inconsistencies exist between the promise of “free mobility” and “universal citizenship” and everyday life in Ecuador, and they have boosted transit both of migrants and Ecuadorean deportees. Before deepening this discussion, it is worth explaining what has caused the progressive turn in migration matters.

The presidency of Rafael Correa (2007–2017) led to the CR government. Aligned with other “postneoliberal” left-wing Latin American governments, the “Correísmo” aimed to recover the prominent role of the state, generate social investment, nationalize public assets (Ramírez and Minteguiaga 2007), and reinforce Ecuador’s national sovereignty against any US interference (Pugh 2017). In migration matters, for the first time the state turned its gaze to emigrants and their inclusion in his presidential campaign meant that thousands of votes from Ecuadoreans abroad helped ensure that Correa won the presidency. Correa’s discourse emphasized the need to overcome the global border regime (Freier 2013; Margheritis 2011), as he emphasized that “we all are migrants” and that “we all have the right to move freely across national borders.”<sup>7</sup>

During the 2007 constitution process, civil society representatives collectively endeavored to introduce key constitutional articles devoted to migration. Since then Ecuador has openly advocated the “principle of universal citizenship of free movement of all inhabitants of the planet, and the progressive extinction of the status of alien or foreigner as an element to transform the unequal relations between countries, especially those between North and South” (Article 416), and guarantees foreigners “the same rights and duties as Ecuadoreans” (Article 9), where “no human being will be considered as illegal because of their migratory condition” (Article 40), and where “the right to migrate and the right to asylum-seeking and refugee status is part of the legal body” (Article 41). In addition, the Ministry of the Migrant was created in November 2007, the first state institution dedicated to implementing a national migration policy. Finally, in 2008 Rafael Correa publicly introduced his decision to unilaterally lift all visa requirements to enter Ecuador under a 90-day tourist condition.

These political reforms would apparently preclude any bilateral cooperation with the US in terms of external policing mechanisms, a constitutive element of transit countries (Düvell et al. 2014). In a country that constitutionally conceives of mobility as a human right, there should be no place for the persecution of irregularized migrants, and transit abroad should neither be tracked nor represent any national security threat. However, as already mentioned, transit through Ecuador has been full of complex inconsistencies that have affected the everyday lives of migrants and pushed them to transit through other countries instead, which are discussed next.

### *The Subtle Presence of the US Externalized Border*

Although the CR government adopted political measures to reinforce Ecuador’s national sovereignty, the US border policy still affects the country, particularly in the selective control of mobility and in combating migrant smuggling. In response, the Ecuadorean government has adopted measures for strengthening national sovereignty, including: in 2009, the cessation of the 2007 agreement allowing a US military base to operate at Manta (Calderón 2007); in 2011, the expulsion from Ecuador of both the World Bank representative and the US ambassador to Ecuador; and, in 2013, the expulsion of USAID (*El País* 2011). As Ricardo Patiño, Ecuador’s foreign minister from 2010 to 2017, asserted, “all these measures were adopted to dismantle US political infiltration in Ecuador’s public and private institutions” (*TeleSUR TV* 2012). In tandem, two political measures in migratory matters were adopted to deal with inconsistencies between the 2008 constitution and the subtle presence of the US border policy.

First, in 2009, only six months after the adoption of the policy that abolished entry visas, visas were reintroduced for citizens of China, Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Eritrea, Kenya, Nepal, Nigeria, Pakistan, and Somalia, supposedly to combat smuggling networks and prevent them from using Ecuador. Beyond the political justification, which tried to disguise the public secret regarding historical transit migration, this measure may also be seen as an outcome of direct pressure from the US (Freier 2013). My fieldwork findings confirm this hypothesis. When I interviewed both the then president of the 2008 Constitutional Assembly and the then minister of the interior and former majority party member of the National Assembly, they confirmed that reimposing a visa requirement on the aforementioned nationalities was a response to international pressure, primarily from the US government:

There were international pressures, but also internal pressures from members of the opposition parties, right-wing parties, ideologically aligned with an international mandate to stop certain types of migration and to make an effort for national security to be the only priority. (Former minister of the interior and former member of the National Assembly, Quito, September 2016)

Frankly, yes, during the first months of 2009 we received direct pressure from the US to remove the adopted changes in migration matters. (Former president of the Constitutional Assembly of 2008, Quito, September 2016)

Furthermore, cables published by WikiLeaks (*BBC News Mundo* 2012) revealed that the US government was concerned about the visa-free policy, as Ecuador could be used as a “trampoline for those intending to immigrate to the U.S. . . . causing instability to all America” (US ambassador to Ecuador, July 2008, quoted in Freire 2013: 17). The reimposition of visas shows that exclusionary and racist criteria inherent in the global border control regime prevailed. The latest reimposition of visas for Cubans as an outcome of the 2016 “migration crisis” is further evidence of bilateral agreements. Trampling over its own constitutional principles, the selective reimposition of visas also proves that Ecuador, as a transit country, functions as a preliminary US border in controlling undesirable mobility.

Second, ethnographic findings confirm that mid-range public officials and street-level bureaucrats are trained at the International Law Enforcement Academy, established and funded by the US State Department to provide policy guidance, among other things, in border policing and combating organized crime. Likewise, according to Ecuadorean border agents interviewed during fieldwork, the US Embassy directly trains officials on border control tactics. The fact that there are “selective forms of collaboration” (Russell and Tokatlian 2011) between the US and Ecuador reveals clear inconsistencies with the CR’s national sovereignty project, which apparently reached its limits when it comes to migration matters. Apart from the subtle presence of the US in migratory matters, ambiguities and clear limitations in Ecuadorean migratory policies have also been determinant in the production of Ecuador as a space of transit, which I analyze next.

### ***Coexistence of a Progressive Constitution and a Repressive Law***

Between the adoption of the new constitution in September 2008 and January 2017, when the new Organic Law of Human Mobility was adopted, an outdated repressive law issued during a dictatorial regime remained in use. The 1971 Migratory Law was based on a control and security approach. This meant that there was no consideration of human rights in detention, exclusion, and deportation. Furthermore, because there was no provision for migrants to regularize their migratory conditions, they became targets of the law (Anderson 2010; Arcentales and Garbay 2012). The 1971 law did not specify where immigration detainees should be confined, and in practice they

were detained in provisional detention centers across the country before they were deported. For example, in 2016, in an unconstitutional act, 121 Cuban migrants in transit were detained, imprisoned, and deported (Álvarez Velasco 2016). For all this, the 2017 law clearly has the potential to be a watershed in migration matters and thus to become a legal instrument that matches the constitution, something that has been needed in the past decade to ensure migrants' rights.

The accumulation of disappointment and frustration for immigrants contrasts with an imagined, yet impossible, life in Ecuador. Through their personal accounts, I learned how Ecuadorean deportees and migrants confront state forms of control and social, economic, and cultural frontiers. In the case of migrants, the welcoming promise of "free mobility" and "universal citizenship" created a false expectation. In 14 out of the 16 migrant cases I followed, migrants perceived this promise as an automatic "free right to residency." As Angela, a 28-year-old Dominican migrant, argued: "This country [Ecuador] is not only promoted as a place where we can enter without a visa, but where we, migrants, have the same rights as Ecuadoreans. Suddenly, officials say that we cannot regularize because of new regulations. I feel as if I was fooled." Angela's perception was common among the migrants. They asserted that once they got to Ecuador they were hit by a reality that was very distant from the "welcoming promise" and riddled with inconsistencies—obstacles for regularizing, limitations in being recognized as a refugee, threats of being deported, and overall, social and economic impediments to creating a new life.

When asked what Ecuador represented to them, their replies reflected harsh experiences that in a sense explained why they opted to continue their journey to another country: "Ecuador is like a corner. Corners are insignificant spaces that you are obliged to traverse when you are walking in the street. People do not stay at a corner. From a corner, we have to move on," said Claude, a 38-year-old Haitian migrant. "This country pushes you out. I feel as if people here were pushing me outside," reflected Danah, a 38-year-old Syrian woman. "A place where I do not want to stay. Here I understood what it means to be black, that public employees do not care about migrants and do not want us to be here, and that we are doomed to wait and wait, but I do not want that," stated Mustafa, a 36-year-old Sudanese migrant. "I feel dismayed by this country. Too many promises, and too much suffering. I cannot regularize, I cannot find a job. I cannot build a place for me. I have to go," said Carmen, a 49-year-old Dominican migrant.

Their voices confirm the existence of multiple types of borders, including: social discrimination and racism; language barriers; limitations for qualified migrants to find formal jobs, resulting in their deskilling; confinement to informal temporary jobs; and impoverishment, invisibility, marginalization, and precariousness.

Compared with enduring such harsh conditions, moving elsewhere, either guided by local coyotes or engaged in autonomous transits with the aid of digital devices, has been migrants' response. In fact, 15 out of the 20 migrants I followed undertook journeys toward the US with the help of WhatsApp or Facebook communication. They told me how robbery, extortion, threats of collective or individual kidnapping, torture, rape, accidents, disappearances, and murders were commonly encountered along the land routes that connect Ecuador with the Mexico-US corridor. While it is evident that the violence on the route is a consequence of the US externalized southern border policy (Hiemstra 2019; Varela 2015), the political inconsistencies of the Ecuadorean state aggravate this complex reality.

## Conclusions

From this reflection we can draw some inferences regarding the (re)configuration of Ecuador as a transit country. Historically, Ecuador might be seen as a "node in the world system" (Hey-

man 2004), whereby Ecuadorean deportees and migrants—or an irregularized labor force—have been coming and going to the US, while profitable smuggling networks have established a long-standing social process to facilitate irregularized transit.

The convergence of global dynamics and local contexts is a core element in understanding why Ecuador currently is a transit country. The diversion effects produced by “fortress Europe” and the US, together with Ecuador’s “free mobility” and “universal citizenship” promise, have made the country a migratory magnet or a crossing point in transcontinental routes.

On the other hand, Ecuador’s transit condition cannot be understood without considering the subtle effects of the US externalized border policy. Since at least the 1980s, there has been a common agenda to deal with “highly sensitive issues of mutual interest such as migration, organized crime, illicit drugs,” among others (Russell and Tokatlian 2011: 139–140). Ecuador’s leftist turn has not modified that agenda, which, as I have shown, has been present in the midst of the “postneoliberal” turn. Moreover, Ecuador has ended up being a preliminary filter to halt the unwanted movement of people, while simultaneously being a springboard for the irregularized transit of labor power, mainly toward the US. This means that, currently, the subtle presence of the US externalized border, together with national political and policy inconsistencies, have had both a repressive and a productive effect (Anderson 2010), which has functioned to produce a systemic form of control of transit mobility.

The fact that, during the past decade, the progressive constitutional turn in migration matters appears to be nothing more than a change in rhetoric illustrates the limits of the Ecuadorean left-wing project regarding transit migration. This research finding recalls Gregory Feldman’s (2011) argument that irregularized transit migration is a “win-win” situation for right-wing ideology, for no left-wing projects or more progressive political sectors have truly dissented, problematized, or transformed exclusionary state control practices. As we have seen, Ecuador is a clear case in point.

I have demonstrated that unlike other transit countries, Ecuador’s condition as a transit country and the role it has played and still does in the geopolitics of contemporary migration has just begun to be publicly addressed, remaining more of a sort of public secret. This means that some problematic aspects of this condition have been “known, but cannot be spoken” due to power relations and particular political and economic interests at stake. Those aspects include: (1) the historical involvement of state and nonstate actors in a highly lucrative illicit economy built around irregularized transit; (2) violations of the constitution regarding the migratory question that affect both Ecuadoreans and international migrants; (3) the fact that political, social, and economic institutions have not kept pace with the influx of Ecuadorean deportees and international migrants, driving them to continue their journey abroad; and (4) the assumption that both international migrants and Ecuadorean deportees continue their journey to other countries because of the limitations in Ecuador for reconfiguring their new life projects.

The public secret regarding Ecuador’s condition as a transit country thus manifests in repeated violations of the constitution and in the persistence of social, economic, political, and cultural exclusions that have been neither addressed nor transformed. It likewise manifests in the fact that immigrants and Ecuadorean deportees experience forms of racism, inequality, and the exacerbation of precariousness in their everyday lives. The logic of the public secret supposes that strategically their presence in the country is not even noticed and overlooks the chain of violations of their rights. The scant attention given to transit migrants is linked with the fact that they come from poor countries in conflict, or that they arrive in Ecuador because they have committed a “crime”—that of being irregular migrants in the US.

The public secret means not dealing with the fact that Ecuador for the past five decades has been a space of transit toward the Mexico-US corridor of irregularized Ecuadoreans and

migrants who, mainly through smuggling networks, become incorporated into a much larger flow of Central American migrants transiting to Mexico, and later on, into the even larger flow of Mexicans moving to the US. Consequently, Ecuador as a transit country ends up being a key piece in a violent and racist global apartheid, to paraphrase Etienne Balibar (2006), configured against irregularized transit migrants. However, dismayed by the failure of the welcoming promise of “free mobility” and “universal citizenship” and directly resenting the effects of that public secret, migrants persist in their incorrigible desire to move (De Genova 2016). Acknowledging the logics of that public secret allows us to understand the historical and present place of Ecuador in the global phenomenon of transit migration and the complex and violent dynamics at stake in its (re)configuration as a transit country.

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## NOTES

1. I use the term “irregularized migration” rather than “irregular migration.” Echoing migration scholars (Bauder 2013; De Genova 2002), its use is intended to engender an understanding of the social and political processes that render some people “irregular.”
2. The unit is a local office run by the Provincial Government of Pichincha, where Ecuador’s capital city is located, which provides social, psychological, and legal support and economic advice to Ecuadorean returned and deported migrants, to worldwide immigrants including migrants in transit, to asylum seekers, and to refugees.
3. A good example of the government rhetoric regarding migration is included in the 2007 National Plan for Migration, which explicitly mentions that “Ecuador is built as a homeland for all; it does not accept the existence of illegal human beings and therefore claims the right to free human mobility and the right to participation and interculturality” (SENAMI 2007).
4. *Diario El Comercio* is one of the newspapers with the largest circulation nationwide and the newspaper of major importance within the Ecuadorean capital.
5. Information provided by the National Directorate of Migration of the Ministry of Interior of Ecuador.
6. See <https://visual.ly/community/interactive-graphic/travel/visa-mapper>.
7. Correa frequently referred to the 2003 imposition of the Schengen visa or the massive deportation of migrants as clear examples of the unjust ways that a neoliberal border regime operates.

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