

# Dirty Work, Dangerous Others

## The Politics of Outsourced Immigration Enforcement in Mexico

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■ **ABSTRACT:** While Mexico has been openly critical of US immigration enforcement policies, it has also served as a strategic partner in US efforts to externalize its immigration enforcement strategy. In 2016, Mexico returned twice as many Central Americans as did the United States, calling many to criticize Mexico for doing the United States' "dirty work." Based on ethnographic research and discourse analysis, this article unpacks and complicates the idea that Mexico is simply doing the "dirty work" of the United States. It examines how, through the construction of "dirty others"—as vectors of disease, criminals, smugglers, and workers—Central Americans come to embody "matter out of place," thus threatening order, security, and the nation itself. Dirt and dirtiness, in both symbolic and material forms, emerge as crucial organizing factors in the politics of Central American transit migration, providing an important case study in the dynamics between transit and destination states.

■ **KEYWORDS:** Central American migrants, dirty work, Mexico, securitization, transit, United States

In the summer of 2014, more than 68,000 unauthorized Central American youth fleeing violence and poverty in their home countries arrived at the US-Mexico border. The spectacle of this so-called surge of child arrivals prompted both an outpouring of anti-immigrant sentiment and calls for a more humanitarian refugee policy in the United States. While the Obama administration did take some steps to enable Central American children to apply for refugee status through a lawfully present parent in the US under the Central American Minors (CAM) Program, the more immediate US response was to discourage Central Americans from migrating by making it publicly clear they would not be considered refugees upon arrival to the US. More quietly, they increased pressure on Mexico to aid in curbing the number of Central Americans reaching the US-Mexico border. In July 2014, Mexico implemented Programa Frontera Sur, a US-funded securitization program designed to stop Central American migrants in Mexico's southern border region, long before reaching US soil. The Mexican government's discourse around Programa Frontera Sur is steeped in the language of human rights, development, and progress, while the policy has in effect increased the criminalization and vulnerability of unauthorized migrants.

Mexico and the United States have a complex and often contradictory relationship around the question of unauthorized migration. On one hand, Mexico has been openly critical of US immigration policies, particularly those that criminalize and endanger Mexican migrants crossing the US-Mexico border, and institutionalize everyday forms of racism and discrimination toward Mexican immigrants in the US. On the other hand, Mexico has historically served as



a strategic partner in US efforts to externalize its border enforcement strategy by curbing the arrival of unauthorized Central American and Caribbean asylum seekers and migrants crossing its territory. This hypocrisy, particularly in the context of Programa Frontera Sur, has prompted critics to call out the Mexican government for doing the “dirty work” of the United States.

The idea of “dirty work” is not unique to the North and Central American context. Recent reports from Niger and Libya document the “dirty work” being done on behalf of the European Union to stop migrants from crossing the Mediterranean (McCormick 2017; Tinti 2017). The concept of “dirty work” thus presents an interesting point of analysis for scholars of transit. An exciting body of scholarship has addressed the political, economic, and social dimensions of transit migration in countries worldwide (Basok et al. 2015; Collyer et al. 2012; Mainwaring and Brigden 2016; Missbach 2015; Phillips and Missbach 2017b). Of particular interest in this article are the relations and contradictions that emerge between transit states and their often more powerful neighbors (Missbach and Phillips, this volume). Scholars have argued that transit migration may function as an “international bargaining chip,” where transit states in the global South may resist and make demands for political and economic currency (De Haas 2008; Hess 2012: 436). Not only do transit states receive financial aid, but local migration-related economies also benefit state agents, smugglers, and local actors (Andersson 2014). Transit states, like destination states, may have limited genuine interest in actually stopping migration flows, despite posturing to the contrary (De Haas 2008). Thus, while transit states around the world may be commissioned to do the “dirty work” of their more powerful neighbors, such relationships must be understood as historically constituted, mutually beneficial—at least to some parties—and ultimately tenuous.

Based on long-term ethnographic fieldwork along migrant routes in Mexico and discourse analysis of political rhetoric and policy, this article seeks to complicate ideas that Mexico is simply doing the “dirty work” of the United States. Instead, I use the concept of “dirty work” and “dirt” more generally as a jumping-off point to understand multiple interconnected layers in the political economy and lived experience of clandestine transit within the Central America–Mexico–US corridor. I begin by outlining the outsourcing of immigration enforcement to Mexico and the ways it is historically bound to a larger security agenda. I then draw on the work of Mary Douglas and Liisa Malkki to examine how dirt and dirtiness, in their symbolic and material forms, have become central to the politics around Central American migration in Mexico and vis-à-vis US political rhetoric. Through the construction of Central Americans as “dirty others”—vectors of disease, criminals, smugglers, and workers—they come to embody “matter out of place” that threatens order, security, and the nation itself in both US and Mexican contexts (Douglas [1966] 2013; Malkki 1995). Such anxieties have become even more heightened through the recent political hysteria around several caravans of Central American asylum seekers traveling across Mexico. I argue that constructions of these “dirty” and transient others work to justify immigration enforcement policies and maintain the socioracial hierarchies crucial to capitalist economies. In doing so, I link the political forms of “dirty work” carried out by states, the social constructions of dirt circulated within societal discourses, and the actual “dirty work” performed by migrant and immigrant laborers. I end with a brief discussion of the ways these processes have transformed Mexico into not only a sending and transit country, but increasingly a destination country.

### **Dirty States: Drug-War Economics and Outsourcing US Immigration Enforcement to Mexico**

Mexican-US relations have a complex history, and the securitization of transit routes within Mexico’s interior is embedded within deeper historical, transnational, and cultural currents.

For decades Mexico has implemented various crackdowns on Central Americans in response to heightened concern about security and immigration in the United States (Galemba 2015; Vogt 2017). Central Americans first began crossing Mexico as asylum seekers and refugees during years of civil war in the 1980s (García 2006). In the late 1980s, the Mexican government worked with the US to curb the movement of Central American refugees fleeing conditions of civil war (Frelick 1991). When the wars were over, Central Americans continued to cross in significant numbers, though they were regarded primarily as economic migrants. In the 1990s and early 2000s, in response to US pressure, Mexico implemented several immigration enforcement programs to “secure the south,” and the numbers of deportations along major routes and highways rose (Casillas 2001; M. Castillo 2003b; Galemba 2015; Vogt 2017). During this period, because unauthorized entry into Mexico was still legally criminalized, transit migrants began bypassing these routes by riding across Mexico on the tops of freight trains, colloquially known as “La Bestia” (The Beast) and “El Tren de la Muerte” (The Train of Death) because migrants regularly experience robbery, extortion, physical abuse, injury, kidnapping, and death perpetrated by both criminals and Mexican officials (Basok et al. 2015; Brigden 2015; M. Castillo 2003a; Izcarra Palacios 2016; Martínez 2013; Vogt 2018).

These routes became even more militarized and dangerous as Mexico accelerated its US-supported war on drugs and drug cartels in the late 2000s. In 2007, Mexican President Felipe Calderón and US President George W. Bush signed a bilateral security partnership called the Mérida Initiative. The Mérida Initiative, which has dispersed over US\$2.8 billion to Mexico since 2008, was touted as “a new paradigm for security cooperation” that reflected the shared “deep concern” over the threat of drug trafficking and organized crime in the US and Mexico (US State Department 2007). The stated pillars of the Mérida Initiative are to disrupt organized crime, institutionalize rule of law, and create a twenty-first-century border. The Central American Regional Security Initiative was implemented in 2009 and officially described as a “shared partnership” by the US State Department (2010). The Mérida Initiative was framed to combat drug trafficking and organized crime, including human trafficking, rather than unauthorized immigration. However, the strategic blurring between human trafficking (the holding and transporting of people against their will and for the purposes of exploitation) and human smuggling (helping people cross borders in return for payment) allowed the redirection of funding to move seamlessly into immigration enforcement. Following its implementation, Mexico continued to militarize migrant routes through checkpoints and detention facilities, particularly along highways and railways in its southern states. More than this, drug cartels, often in coordination with corrupt police, began diversifying their activities to carry out systematic extortion and kidnapping operations along migrant routes.

Such violence remained relatively unchecked until 2010 and the gruesome discovery of 72 migrants brutally murdered in what is known as the Tamaulipas massacre. After the massacre, international and civil society migrant rights’ groups increased pressure on the Mexican government to overhaul its outdated migration policies. In 2011, Mexico passed a new migration law, which guaranteed health and education rights to unauthorized migrants, as well as procedures for migrants to regularize their status. The law was intended to help reconcile Mexico’s hypocrisy in its poor treatment of Central Americans and thus strengthen its position with respect to the treatment of unauthorized Mexicans in the United States (González-Murphy 2013). In practice, however, most Central Americans are unable and/or unwilling to seek access to these rights without the assistance of human rights advocates, wary of interacting with Mexican state institutions and officials who are known to abuse them. Those who do seek to apply or renew their status encounter new financial and bureaucratic barriers, creating what Basok and Wiesner (2018) call “precarious legality.”

Moreover, the discursive, practical, and moral underpinnings of the law became increasingly hard to reconcile with Mexico's increased securitization of its southern border under pressure from the United States, particularly after the implementation of the Mérida-funded Programa Frontera Sur (Southern Border Program) in the wake of the 2014 "crisis" of unaccompanied minors (Seelke and Finklea 2017). After its enactment, Mexican apprehensions of Central Americans rose dramatically. Mexican apprehensions of Central Americans increased 85 percent in the first two years after the implementation of Programa Frontera Sur.

The official stated objective of Programa Frontera Sur is to "protect and safeguard the human rights of migrants who enter and transit through Mexico and establish order at international crossings to increase development and security in the region" (Presidencia de la República 2014, author translation). Through such discourse the Mexican government presents itself as a benevolent humanitarian force, distinguishing itself from the more hardline anti-immigrant rhetoric that has characterized US public and political discourse for decades. Yet, despite the program's discursive promises of human rights and humanitarianism, it has amounted to little more than an intensification of securitized policing and vulnerability for migrants crossing Mexico, many of them unaccompanied minors and families who must travel even more clandestine routes. The fear that Central Americans experience in Mexico hinders them from reporting abuse, fueling a culture of impunity and diminished access to justice (Isacson et al. 2017; Vogt 2018). While the disjuncture between Mexican rhetoric around human rights and state practices of increased militarization appear contradictory, as scholars of other transit contexts have noted, the securitization of borders and humanitarianism are in fact mutually constitutive (Andersson 2014). The perceived absence of order through "humanitarian spectacle" (Aguirre 2001) becomes further evidence that borders must be contained. This is especially true in drug-war Mexico, where violence and uncertainty are characteristics of life for everyday Mexicans and, as I discuss below, Central Americans are constructed as dangerous and dirty others.

Through its funding for the Mérida Initiative and Programa Frontera Sur, the United States has effectively outsourced its security and immigration enforcement strategy to Mexico's interior. This has led journalists, activists, and some politicians to invoke the idea of "dirty work" in describing the geopolitical dynamic between Mexico and the US (e.g., Sorrentino 2015). Human rights activists in southern Mexico regularly call out the Mexican government for doing the "dirty work" of the United States as they witness firsthand the violent effects of securitization on the lives of transit migrants. In 2016, a coalition of nearly 40 nongovernmental organizations based in Mexico and the United States filed a petition to the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights to address the systematic human rights violations carried out against Central American migrants in transit in Mexico. The petition argues that both countries violate international proscriptions against the unlawful refoulement of refugees through the systematic deportation of Central Americans at the behest of the United States.

Yet is such dirty work simply the result of unequal power dynamics between the two countries? Former secretary of foreign affairs of Mexico, Jorge Castañeda (2018), argued that Mexico has agreed to do Washington's "dirty work" with regard to immigration in exchange for favorable trade conditions in the recently renegotiated North American Free Trade Agreement. Mexico's willingness to do the "dirty work" of the US is deeply embedded within trade and security relationships between the two countries and, as I have argued elsewhere, the economic incentives for local actors who benefit from local migration economies (Vogt 2013). The economic and political interests of Mexican politicians, organized criminals, and ordinary people may thus temper any genuine interest in actually stopping Central American migration in Mexico. At the same time, these political and economic realities are inextricably intertwined with cultural currents. Drug-war Mexico is wracked with violence, insecurity, and economic precarity.

In this context, Central American migrants, as gendered and racialized others, become easily stereotyped as criminals, delinquents, rapists, and kidnappers. Cultural crises and hysteria around immigrants justify more punitive security measures, even at times when unauthorized immigration is low.<sup>1</sup> Constructions of dirt and dirtiness are central to anti-immigrant sentiment, which in turn influences immigration and transit policy targeting unauthorized Central Americans in both the United States and Mexico.

### Dirty Immigrants: Invasive Parasites and Dangerous Others

Immigration enforcement does not emerge in a vacuum. On the contrary, it is implemented by nations seeking to demonstrate their capacity to protect themselves from external threats such as illegal actors who threaten their sovereignty by diminishing state control of their borders (Andreas 2000). This border management rationale is manifest through symbols and messages that play out in the media and among the broader public. For example, while most residents of destination countries do not witness firsthand the movement of transit migrants across borders and territory, they are bombarded with images and stories of overcrowded boats and tractor-trailers, of people walking through dusty desert landscapes. Borders function as political stages where states demonstrate their power to protect the nation from unsavory, undeserving, and dangerous others (Andreas 2000; Galemba 2013). Historically in the United States, immigration policies and border security have been framed as responses to “invasions” by various “illegal aliens”—Chinese, Japanese, Mexicans—whom Mae Ngai (2004) calls “impossible subjects.” In recent decades, people from Latin America have come to embody the primary invading threat to the nation in the media and in political discourse (Chavez 2008). They are portrayed as dangerous and often “dirty” others—illegals, rapists, smugglers, gang members, and pregnant women—who threaten to harm, spread disease among, steal jobs from, or suck resources from deserving citizens.

As Mary Douglas argued, dirt must be understood as a social construct to distinguish between order and disorder. Dirt is disorder; it is “matter out of place” (Douglas [1966] 2013: 2). Things, actions, or people that are “dirty” are seen as threats to order and the purity of those “in place.” Dirt and dirtiness become salient categories in understanding the association between (im)migrants and pollution, disease, contagion, and moral disrepute. Building on Douglas, Liisa Malkki (1995: 7–8) argues that refugees are perceived as pollutants whose existence threatens the security of the nation: “They represent an attack on the categorical order of nations which so often ends up being perceived as natural, and therefore, as inherently legitimate.” The threat posed by refugees can be extended to migrants and asylum seekers in transit more generally, particularly in worldwide contexts where populist nationalism and anti-immigrant sentiment are on the rise. In fact, such transient populations may be seen as even more threatening, their presence not limited to camps or enclaves, but instead woven into the fabric of everyday life in transit communities.

In Mexico and the United States, Central American migrants have come to embody multiple forms of threatening dirt. Not unlike the racial slur of “dirty Mexicans” in the United States, in Mexico, the idea of “dirty Central Americans” is also salient. In the southern border states of Oaxaca and Chiapas, where I did the bulk of my fieldwork, a derogatory slang term for a person from Central America was *cachuco*, which translates to “dirty pig” or “dirty Central American.” Central Americans are often associated with dirty work, dirty practices, dirty people, and actual dirt. They may also be conflated with “dirty smugglers” and “dirty criminals” whose presence attracts “dirty cops” to local communities. Such constructions can be read as

codes for deeper social hierarchies and anxieties based on class, race, nationality, and gender. The treatment of Central Americans in Mexico is connected to culture wars in the US, where both Mexican and Central Americans are constructed as “dirty” dangerous others in political and media discourses and strategically deployed with respect to contemporary movements of Central Americans within the Central American–Mexican–US corridor.

### ***Parasitic Bodies***

One particular manifestation of the “dirty immigrant” is the idea that foreigners are vectors of disease. There is a long history of public health policies and discourses that racialize immigrant populations and reinforce stereotypes of immigrants as diseased, morally inferior, and not worthy of membership in the larger society (Molina 2006). During the height of the 2014 unaccompanied minors “crisis,” a surge of anti-immigrant rhetoric became fixated on Central American children as carriers of disease. Politicians and media outlets used fear-mongering tactics to spread falsehoods about the health risks posed by Central American children. In a particularly notable example, Republican Phil Gingrey, a US Representative from the state of Georgia, wrote a letter to the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) outlining his concerns that Central American children were potential vectors of swine flu, dengue fever, tuberculosis, and Ebola virus. Yet children from Central America have high immunization rates, and in a 2017 report released by the CDC to screen and evaluate Central American refugees, the above diseases were not considered threats. Rather, the report stressed the treatment of context-specific conditions affecting the well-being of Central American refugee children, including mental health, anemia, nutrition, Chagas disease, lead exposure, and soil-transmitted helminth infections (US Department of Health and Social Services 2017).

The misconception that diseases originate abroad and are brought to the US through immigrants leads to their further stigmatization, discrimination, and exclusionary policies. Nativist rhetoric that blames immigrants for the spread of disease is not just about biological health, but also reflects larger societal anxieties. As Jonathan Xavier Inda argues, such rhetoric is used to blame immigrants for social ills such as unemployment and crime. Immigrants are seen as parasites “intruding on the body of the host nation, drawing nutrients from it, while providing nothing to its survival and even threatening its well-being” (Inda 2000: 47).

### ***Infesting Criminals***

Central Americans have in both the US and Mexico come to embody the category of dangerous other. As the numbers of Mexican immigrants apprehended at the border fell below the numbers of Central Americans apprehended, anti-immigrant sentiment in the US turned to target Central Americans more specifically. Collapsing the categories of Central American immigrants and criminals has been a favored tactic used by Donald Trump during his presidential campaign and presidency. It could be argued that public enemy number one under the Trump administration is MS-13, a Salvadoran gang born on the streets and in the prisons of Los Angeles before many of its members were deported to politically unstable postwar El Salvador, where they took root and gained power (Martinez 2017; Zilberg 2011). Despite the fact that many Salvadoran asylum seekers, particularly children, are fleeing violence from gangs like MS-13, Trump and his associates continue to use MS-13 as a reason to stop Central Americans from entering the country. For example, in a tweet made at the height of public outrage surrounding the separation of Central American children from their parents in 2018, Trump referenced “illegal immigrants” who “pour into and infest our Country, like MS-13.” In addition to the conflation

of immigrants and gang members, his use of the word “infest” likens unauthorized immigrants to pests, again playing on the construction of immigrants as polluting parasites invading the nation. Kirstjen Nielsen, then US secretary of homeland security, used similar language in an attempt to fuel fears of an increase in criminal entrants accompanying children: “Those are traffickers, those are smugglers, that is MS-13, those are criminals, those are abusers” (quoted in Bump 2018). Contrary to such claims, immigrants in the United States are actually less likely to commit violent crimes than their citizen counterparts, and there is no association between immigration rates and crime rates (Mears 2002).

In Mexico, the nativist discourse around Central American migrants is not spouted from the mouths or Twitter accounts of heads of state or officials as it is in the US. In contrast, Mexican officials speak more in the language of protecting the rights of Central Americans, even if their actions do not follow their words. Rather, it is on the ground, particularly in communities most impacted by migrants in transit, that we see evidence of the familiar conflation of immigrants with dangerous others—criminals, smugglers, and delinquents. Throughout my fieldwork I spoke with local residents who recounted the fear they experienced as increasing numbers of migrants passed through their towns. In at least three cases, local migrant shelters were threatened with closure or successfully shut down by neighborhood protests after instances of alleged violence perpetrated by migrants. For many residents who live near transit routes, which are often in remote areas where the train passes through, it is difficult to distinguish between migrants and the organized criminals who prey on them. In their eyes, they are all transitory outsiders. Such fears are magnified in the context of drug-war Mexico, where everyday violence and insecurity have come to define people’s lives. Since the beginning of Mexico’s war on drugs, an estimated 200,000 Mexican citizens have been killed and tens of thousands have disappeared. In such a violent context, migrants become easy and visible scapegoats to blame, while the structural causes of such violence are rendered invisible.

### ***Ruthless Smugglers***

While there has been significant pushback against the idea that all immigrants are criminals among activists, some politicians, and media, smuggling is still nearly universally treated as pure criminal exploitation. Combatting smuggling networks is a high priority for destination countries and international institutions (Zhang et al. 2018). In contrast to discourses that criminalize migrants, much of this discourse paints migrants as unfortunate victims of brutal criminal smuggling networks. Human smugglers are treated as the root cause of unauthorized migration and blamed for the perilous conditions experienced by migrants during their journeys (Nevins 2008; Zhang et al. 2018). During the 2014 “crisis,” for example, US border authorities and politicians regularly named human smugglers as the heart of the problem. President Obama pleaded with Central American parents not to send their children unaccompanied through Mexico “on trains or through a bunch of smugglers.” He stated, “We don’t even know how many of these kids don’t make it, and may have been waylaid into sex trafficking or killed because they fell off a train” (quoted in Dwyer 2014). Responding to the brutal discovery in 2017 of a tractor-trailer at a San Antonio Walmart carrying 39 people, of whom many were suffering from heat stroke and dehydration and nine ultimately died, Richard L. Durbin Jr., the US attorney for the Western District of Texas, stated, “All were victims of ruthless human smugglers indifferent to the well-being of their fragile cargo . . . These people were helpless in the hands of their transporters.” Law enforcement agents and politicians emphasize the profits that smugglers make and demonize them as ruthless criminals. Moreover, as Obama alluded to in the statement quoted above, the lines between smuggling, trafficking, and organized crime

are often blurred (Galemba 2018). Yet scholars have demonstrated that in Mexico human smuggling is a separate business from organized crime and drug smuggling (Izcara Palacios 2015). Moreover, such discourses obscure the broader reality that smuggling is almost wholly dependent on state enforcement practices (Andreas 2000). While it is easy to blame human smugglers for migrant distress and death, the realities of human smuggling on the ground are far more complicated.

A growing body of critical scholarship on human smuggling examines the complex motivations, identities, and practices involved in facilitating migration (Zhang et al. 2018). The people on the ground working to transport migrants are often acquaintances, family members, or former migrants and refugees trying to make ends meet. While the dangers of crossing Mexico are not to be underestimated and some smugglers may be deceptive and abusive, smugglers are often seen more as guides, facilitators, and even protectors. Migrants depend on smugglers for their knowledge, connections, and decision making along transit routes (Zhang et al. 2018). Smugglers rely on having a “good reputation,” which means delivering people safely to their destinations (Brigden 2015). In response to securitization in Mexico and the proliferation of organized criminals in drug-war Mexico, migrants who initially attempt to cross on their own find that they need a smuggler who will help them navigate corrupt state officials and criminal groups controlling migrant routes and demanding that migrants and their smugglers pay “taxes” to cross through their territory.

Interestingly, the complex distinctions between smugglers also play out through a lens of dirt. One of my closest informants, a priest who runs a shelter in the Mexican state of Oaxaca, distinguished between “clean smugglers,” who work on their own or within small networks, and “dirty smugglers,” who have ties to organized criminals. Journalist John Burnett (2014) quotes a smuggler near the US-Mexico border as saying, “Everybody says we’re the problem, but it’s the reverse. The gringos don’t want to get their hands dirty. So I bring them the Mexicans and Central Americans to do the dirty work for them.” Here, the smuggler argues that the actual practice of smuggling has been outsourced to less powerful individuals who execute the “dirty work” to the benefit of receiving states. That is, smugglers not only facilitate human mobility, but also work to support labor markets—especially for undesirable “dirty work”—that depend on cheap immigrant labor.

### ***Filthy Workers***

While the racialization of immigrants through associating them with dirt and criminality works to maintain racial hierarchies and legitimize state bordering practices, it is also important to consider its role in a global capitalist system. As Nicholas De Genova argues, the languages and images that reproduce and exclude illegal others are “always accompanied by its shadowy, publicly unacknowledged or disavowed, obscene supplement: the large-scale recruitment of illegalized migrants as legally vulnerable, precarious, and thus tractable labour” (De Genova 2013: 1181). The racialization of migrants facilitates local and transnational economies that depend on their labor and their criminalization. In destination countries, low-paid foreign workers become crucial to the accumulation of capital through the performance of “dirty work,” the often grueling, subservient, and literally dirty jobs that average citizens do not want. Around the world, immigrants are highly desirable as laborers in agriculture, domestic servitude, and low-level service positions. The performance of such “dirty work” historically falls along gendered and racialized lines (Anderson 2000). Immigrant men, for example, are more commonly hired as landscapers and construction workers, and immigrant women as nurses, maids, and nannies (Duffy 2007; Ramirez 2011).

In transit contexts, both the facilitation and control of migration fuel lucrative industries (Andersson 2014; Cranston et al. 2018; Phillips and Missbach 2017a). Transit states benefit from trade deals, aid packages, and support, such as the Mérida Initiative in the case of Mexico, to do the “dirty work” of the US. Yet beyond this, we also see more localized economies and forms of “dirty work” emerge along transit routes. In Mexico, Central American migrants, who have fewer rights and are more vulnerable than their Mexican citizen counterparts, engage in multiple forms of “dirty work.” There is a long history of Guatemalan migrants working in the coffee industry in Mexico’s southern border states, where they experience significant discrimination (R. Castillo 2001). Contemporary Central American migrants in transit find informal, piecemeal jobs in towns along the route where they might spend a few days collecting garbage, cleaning homes, or doing yardwork to make enough cash to move on to their next destination. Because they are undocumented, transit migrants are easily exploited. I documented several cases where migrants completed work for local residents and business owners, only to be denied payment for that work. Central American women are also desirable within Mexico’s sex work industry. Within the sex industry, as Patty Kelly (2008) discovered during ethnographic fieldwork, Central American women are known for engaging in more “dirty” sex practices, such as participating in the production of pornography, and are considered depraved, immoral, “loose women” and “filthy foreigners.” Along the route, “dirty police” and criminals profit through the extortion of migrants, as do local businesses that depend on transit migrants as everyday consumers (Vogt 2013). Finally, Central American migrants are desirable to organized criminals, who coerce them into their “dirty work” of extortion, drug smuggling, and sometimes kidnapping other migrants. The demand for cheap, easily exploitable “dirty workers” spans national boundaries, as do the fears and anxieties associated with them.

### **Dirty Politics: Geopolitical Spectacles and Contentious Policies**

The social construct of dirty others has proven a useful political tool. Public and political discourses around immigrants foment fear. The construct also justifies more punitive immigration measures and facilitates political strong-arm tactics in outsourcing policy enforcement to transit states. The links between constructing Central Americans as dirty, dangerous others and the political dirty work carried out by states came to a head in April 2018 with the hysteria surrounding a caravan of migrants transiting through Mexico. Every year around Easter for the past decade, a caravan of migrant rights activists and Central American migrants travel through Mexico to raise awareness of what migrants experience during their journeys. The caravan is largely symbolic, but some participants see it as a way to travel safely through southern Mexico, where there is a high risk of deportation, extortion, kidnapping, and violence. Many of the migrants traveling in the 2018 caravan were from Honduras, seeking asylum either in Mexico or the United States. President Trump caught wind of the caravan, sparking days and weeks of a manufactured crisis about hordes of people on their way to invade the United States. It is useful to include here a string of tweets over the course of a few days. On 1 April 2018, Trump tweeted, “Mexico is doing very little, if not NOTHING, at stopping people from flowing into Mexico through their Southern Border, and then to the U.S . . . They must stop the big drug and people flows, or I will stop their cash cow, NAFTA.” In this tweet Trump berates Mexico for not assisting the US in its immigration enforcement strategy, even though he is factually incorrect, and directly threatens to pull financial incentives for Mexico, namely, the North American Free Trade Agreement, if it does not comply. On 3 April he reiterated his threat to pull NAFTA and expanded it to pull foreign aid from Honduras: “The big caravan of people coming from Hon-

duras, now coming across Mexico and heading toward our ‘Weak Laws’ Border, had better be stopped before it gets there. Cash cow NAFTA is in play, as is foreign aid to Honduras and the countries that allow this to happen.”

Trump’s fearmongering and obsession with the caravan provide insight into the ways the Trump administration used public shaming and economic threats to create the spectacle of crisis and intimidate a long-standing political ally. It also illuminates the complicated and increasingly contentious relationship between the United States and Mexico around the question of Central American transit migration. The Mexican government must walk a fine line between acquiescence and resistance, of protecting state interests and being willing to do Washington’s “dirty work.” In a direct response to Trump’s tweets, President Enrique Peña Nieto released a five-minute video in which he affirms Mexico’s commitment to NAFTA, combating organized crime, protecting Mexican immigrants in the United States, and maintaining a respectful relationship between the two countries. Addressing Trump directly, he stated, “If your recent statements are the result of frustrations due to domestic policy issues, to your laws or to your Congress, it is them that you should turn to, not to Mexicans. We will not allow negative rhetoric to define our actions. We will only act in the best interests of Mexicans.” In the video Peña Nieto clearly seeks to demonstrate Mexico’s integrity and resistance to bullying by the United States. What is noticeably lacking in the video, however, is any mention of the caravan or of Central American migration more generally. On the day Peña Nieto’s video was released, Trump issued another tweet thanking the “strong immigration laws of Mexico and their willingness to use them” in response to reports that Mexican officials had deported several hundred of the caravan’s participants, providing transit and humanitarian visas for the rest to stay in Mexico.

Several months later Trump unleashed another media frenzy over a new caravan of Honduran asylum seekers that he claimed contained “criminals and unknown Middle Easterners” in an apparent attempt to stoke racialized fears of terrorism. Soon after, the Trump administration announced the new “Migration Protection Protocols,” which has been officially dubbed the “Remain in Mexico” policy. Under this policy, the US returns people legally seeking asylum in the US to Mexico for the duration of their immigration proceedings. Mexico is being touted as a safe third country despite evidence that Mexican and Central American returnees are specifically targeted by drug cartels for extortion, kidnapping, and murder once they are dropped off in Mexican border cities (Slack 2019). While the Mexican government is officially opposed to the policy, it is still cooperating with the United States.

The controversial “Remain in Mexico” policy is the latest in a series of challenges Mexico faces as it transforms from simply a country of transit to a destination country for migrants and asylum seekers from Central America. The intensification of immigration enforcement through Programa Frontera Sur has made crossing Mexico increasingly difficult, and many Central Americans decide to stay in Mexico rather than make their way to the US. Between 2014 and 2016 there was a 311 percent increase in the number of people seeking asylum in Mexico (Isacson et al. 2017). In 2017, I interviewed the director of a shelter on Mexico’s southern border who described the new reality of families and unaccompanied children arriving at their door, saying, “This is no longer a migrant shelter, this is a refugee camp.” Since 2014 Mexican immigration authorities have apprehended more than 50,000 unaccompanied children from El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras, detaining the vast majority in immigration detention centers, despite laws against the detention of minors. Mexican law stipulates that unaccompanied minors should be transferred to social service DIF (Sistema para el Desarrollo Integral de la Familia) shelters with appropriate services for children, but the shelters do not have the capacity to house the number apprehended (Dominguez-Villegas 2017). In 2017, Mexico’s Comisión Mexicana de Ayuda a Refugiados (COMAR) failed to attend to 60 percent of the 14,596 peo-

ple who applied for asylum, according to Mexico's Human Rights Commission. In 2018, cases from 2016 were still unresolved, although Mexican law stipulates that asylum cases should be resolved within 45 days (Comisión Nacional de los Derechos Humanos 2018). Much of the burden to assist asylum seekers on Mexico's southern and northern borders is falling to overcrowded nongovernmental migrant shelters, forcing people into local communities and thus stoking fears of transitory others. As this data reveals, Mexico has become more than simply a country of transit, but does not have the infrastructural or institutional ability to accommodate large numbers of migrants or asylum seekers, much less protect their most basic human rights as a "safe third country." As a sending, transit, and now destination country, the Mexican case reveals the profound implications that doing the "dirty work" of outsourced enforcement can have at the national, institutional, and local level.

## Conclusion

This article illuminates how the concepts of "dirty work" and "dirt" more generally are useful for scholars examining the complex relationships between transit and destination countries. It traces the dynamic politics surrounding Central American transit migration through the lens of US-Mexican relations at a time when Mexico has become both a crucial component of the US immigration enforcement regime and a target of nativist anti-immigrant attacks. It argues that, while the concept of "dirty work" captures the unequal power dynamic between the two nations, we must attend to the multiple historical and contemporary forms of "dirt" and "dirty work" that shape the politics and lived experience of transit migration. Transit states carry out "dirty work" within broader structures of economic and political interests. Mexico's willingness to militarize its southern border or cooperate with the United States' "Remain in Mexico" policy, for example, cannot be understood outside the context of economic and security concerns related to NAFTA and the war on drugs. "Dirty work" policies depend on the making of "dirty" dangerous others, which maintain the racialized hierarchies necessary for exploitative capitalism and the consolidation of political power. The criminalization of unauthorized immigrant populations makes them more exploitable as cheap laborers to do the "dirty work" of households, farms, and slaughterhouses in spaces of transit and destination. Immigrants as "parasitical threats" to national order in turn justify policies that seek to exclude and marginalize unauthorized immigrants (Inda 2000: 59), which becomes a profitable industry in its own right.

Through an analysis of these categories and their attendant constructions of order/disorder, we may better understand the ways that order, morality, legitimacy, and inequality are constructed, maintained, and contested in everyday encounters along migrant routes and within the larger political economy of transit in Mexico. We may also understand how cultural constructions are central to the production and management of immigration crises that influence and legitimize the outsourcing of immigration enforcement to transit states and the ways transit states may transform into destination states. At the same time, such a relational analysis demonstrates that transit states are not simply pawns within a larger geopolitical arena. The political, economic, and cultural relations between transit states and their more powerful neighbours remain spaces of contestation.

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## NOTE

1. Mexican migration to the United States has dropped to numbers not seen since the 1970s. In 2000, the US Border Patrol apprehended over 1.6 million Mexicans at the border; by 2015, the number was down to 188,122. In fact, in 2014, the number of “Other than Mexicans” surpassed the number of Mexicans apprehended at the US-Mexico border for the first time (US Border Patrol 2016).

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