

MIGRATION AND COMMUNICATION IN CENTRAL AMERICA. INTERVIEW WITH AMPARO MARROQUÍN PARDUCI

MIGRAÇÃO E COMUNICAÇÃO NA AMÉRICA CENTRAL.

ENTREVISTA COM AMPARO MARROQUÍN PARDUCI

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This interview examines the history of Central American migration through the lens of the political decisions that have influenced the routes and conditions of migrants and discusses the way in which the media approaches migration.

Owing to its geographical location, Central America has historically served as a transit region. According to the International Organization for Migration's World Migration Report, this region emerged as the most significant corridor for human mobility worldwide in the first two decades of the 21st century. Until the 1980s, migration within Central America was relatively fluid. However, from 1994 onwards, starting with Operation Gatekeeper in the United States, a process of militarisation and fortification of the border was initiated, which significantly hindered transit migration. It was an accumulation of absurdities that started in the 1950s with the US-backed coup against the democratic government of Jacobo Árbenz (in Guatemala). The "backyard" status of the countries in the region has condemned their populations to unstable and authoritarian governments, where armed conflicts are a persistent issue. These circumstances have contributed to the impoverishment and repression of citizens.

Restrictive migration policies have led to a rise in irregular migration, heightening the danger and costliness of the journey for migrants. Moreover, these policies have fostered narratives that criminalise migrants and depict them as a threat to the host countries' national security. Addressing the realities of migration requires understanding the structural causes that propel it, including media discourse and information, and implementing public policies that promote ethical practices and penalise disinformation.

Amparo Marroquín Parducci has served as a professor in the Department of Communication and Culture at the Universidad Centroamericana Simeón Cañas in El Salvador since 1997. Her research over the past two decades has focused on migratory processes and their influence on the construction of socio-cultural identities (Marroquín Parducci & Huezco-Mico, 2006). She has also addressed media narratives surrounding this issue (Marroquín Parducci & Carballo, 2021). Her most recent work investigates the establishment of the coyote (guide) profession as a pivotal mediator of the risks encountered by migrants during their journey to a new country. Marroquín Parducci has held visiting professorships in Argentina, Mexico, Colombia, Ecuador, Spain, and the USA. She is a specialist in the work of Jesús Martín Barbero and, since 2021, has served as Dean

of the Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities at the Universidad Centroamericana Simeón Cañas in San Salvador.

Manuel Chaparro (MC): Central America's history has been defined by armed resistance against illegitimate governments, often supported by the United States in the last century. Today, the region contends with impoverished societies where violence and institutional corruption are pervasive. What is the prevailing social, economic, and political context of migration in Central America today?

Amparo Marroquín (AM): This question is complex as it encompasses multiple considerations. I will approach it through a historical lens. I believe that migration, as we understand it today, is shaped by a sequence of political decisions that have influenced both the way people migrate today and the way we see migrants.

Firstly, it is essential to acknowledge that the complexity of the migration process is not coincidental but rather the result of deliberate decisions by those in power and governments implementing specific public policies. The first thing we must understand about Central America is its very particular geographical condition. Serving as a bridge between the southern and northern regions of the continent, Central America remains a pivotal transit point for migrants from one place to another. According to the International Organization for Migration's migration report, this strategic geography has positioned the region as the foremost *corridor for human mobility* in the world during the first two decades of the 21st century (McAuliffe & Triandafyllidou, 2021). In simpler terms, as I write this, numerous individuals are embarking on journeys through the Darien jungle in Panama or crossing the Suchiate River with backpacks on their shoulders in pursuit of a dream. As you read this interview (whenever that may be), others will be observing the flow of the Rio Grande alongside a guide or coyote to determine their next move.

Crossing the borders of the Americas and reaching destination countries within the region is typically quite challenging. However, this has not always been the case. Until the 1980s, it was relatively easy to cross from Mexico to the United States or to reach Costa Rica. Moreover, many countries recognised the severe civil wars in Central America and the daily reality of political persecution. In solidarity, they implemented various programmes that welcomed those seeking to leave the region.

This dynamic began to shift on October 1, 1994, when US President Bill Clinton initiated Operation Gatekeeper, altering the landscape of the US-Mexico border. Clinton made San Diego (in California) one of the most heavily fortified borders, prompting a shift in migration patterns eastward. These measures did not significantly reduce migration; instead, they complicated the journey, increased its danger, and raised costs for those seeking to enter the United States, regardless of their documentation status. By 1997, authorities began acknowledging a migration "crisis" that required careful management. Reinforcing control measures at border crossing points did not work. On September 11, 2001, the attacks on the Twin Towers and the Pentagon were claimed by the extremist organisation Al Qaeda. While this attack was not linked to the circumstances of migrants, it

prompted significant changes once again. Undocumented migration, previously treated as an administrative offence in many host countries, was reclassified as a criminal offence. This shift enabled military involvement in border militarisation efforts and led to stricter penalties for migrants. Media narratives began portraying migrants as “threats to national security.” Gradually, migrant routes were closed, compelling them to travel along the few remaining paths in the region: routes controlled by organised crime. This heightened their vulnerability, as various criminal groups, notably the Zetas cartel — a powerful criminal group founded by former military graduates of the School of the Americas — viewed migrants as new bargaining chips and a source of enrichment. This situation was starkly illustrated in 2010 when 72 migrants from Brazil, Ecuador, Honduras, Guatemala, and El Salvador were tragically murdered.

In Central America, there have been many migratory routes — twenty years ago, the *Human Development Report 2005* of the United Nations (Lopes & Moreira, 2005) highlighted that El Salvador was the only country with significant migratory groups in Belize, Mexico, Australia, Sweden and Italy. Official data now indicates that three countries receive the largest Salvadoran population: the United States, where 88.22% of migrants settle, followed by Canada at 3.24%, and Guatemala at 1.29%. These destinations also take in citizens from other Central American countries, except for Nicaragua, which historically has had substantial migration flows to Costa Rica.

In summary, with this historical overview, I want to emphasise that there have been many destinations for migration and different types of migratory waves, which is why it is important to read events within the context of new measures that tend to target and criminalise migration.

Lastly, it is crucial to highlight the underlying causes of this migration, which are intricately linked to the social, political, and economic context. The motivations for migration have evolved and diversified over time. In Central America, migration is driven by a myriad of factors. One of the most significant is family reunification; every day, people choose to leave their countries to reunite with family members who have migrated. Central America has a long-standing history of migration, spanning anywhere from fifty to a hundred years, depending on the country, with family reunification emerging as a primary motivation.

It is noteworthy that one-tenth of the US population consists of individuals of Central American origin. As of 2021, about 3.8 million people from these countries resided in the United States, with immigrants comprising 40% from El Salvador, 32% from Guatemala, 21% from Honduras, and 7% from Nicaragua (Ward & Batalova, 2023).

MC: To what extent is violence also an influential factor?

AM: Of course, violence, the various forms of violence, is also a determining cause. Domestic violence, especially against women, violence against certain communities, such as the LGBTIQ+ population, and violence against Indigenous populations, such as the Miskito. So, there are different types of displacement linked to violence. On the other

hand, it is important to mention the existence of a growing migrant population related to the new political exiles. There is violence linked to the state and organised crime, which often has connections with government systems in each country. Nicaragua has seen a massive exodus of social leaders and young people involved in student movements, which has increased significantly since 2018. In 2022 alone, US customs registered 165,000 unauthorised Nicaraguan migrants. This state violence has also resulted in the expatriation of more than 300 Nicaraguans, who have been excluded from the civil registry and left without any guarantees. This situation is unprecedented. Some countries, such as Spain, have responded very quickly to take them in. Guatemala, which so far has more than 40 prosecutors in exile due to the intimidating policies of former President Alejandro Giammattei's government (2020–2024), has witnessed the departure of numerous judges and social activists who have fled due to threats. El Salvador lacks concrete records, but reports indicate that at least 40 individuals are in exile, with this number steadily increasing in a continuous and systematic flow. This politically motivated migration also affects Honduras, particularly with the persecution of environmental leaders (remember the murder of Berta Cáceres). This leads me to another cause of migration, which is sometimes not associated with the region's mobility patterns.

Migration is currently occurring as a result of ecological catastrophes and environmental degradation. Over the past 15 years, environmental factors have intensified the migratory drama. Communities facing severe water shortages and droughts are compelled to migrate because they can no longer cultivate in the areas where they have always done so. These communities can no longer sustain themselves through their trades. In El Salvador, for instance, the entire coastal zone has been privatised to support the tourism model promoted by Nayib Bukele's government. These new elements add to the perverse dynamic that must be taken into account.

MC: Regarding the dynamics of communication, how do the media in the region approach migration? As an event, a political issue, or a social drama?

AM: I will begin by briefly highlighting the various approaches to studying migration. There are numerous types of studies on migration in the Central American region, which I categorise into three main types: studies produced through cooperation initiatives, typically funded by host countries. These studies' approach emphasises a specific need: to contain or at least reduce irregular migration. They aim to illustrate the dangers associated with irregular migration and establish basic agreements with migrants' countries of origin to prevent humanitarian crises such as migrant caravans — massive groups of people in exodus who walk together and grow in size along the way. They started in 2018, and they typically mobilise between two and ten thousand people. A second group of studies originates from academia, research centres, and universities. Many of these studies focus on migration and various types of mobility from the perspective of nation-states, which sometimes limits a comprehensive understanding of the region's complexity. However, these studies underscore the significance of migration as a human

right. Lastly, the research and reflection conducted by migrant organisations themselves. These works are more testimonial and tend to highlight the importance of freely migrating for those who choose to do so, enjoying all their rights or staying if that is each individual's decision.

The media are, in a way, a reflection of these discourses. Comparative studies have been conducted at different times, some of which we led with a team of researchers in a large-scale project from 2008 to 2012. In this project, we analysed the media across all countries in the Central American region and identified common approaches that persist to this day.

Firstly, we found that there are two main narratives in the dominant discourse. The first approach in the media is a festive discourse, one of celebration. This type of coverage emphasises that migration is a fundamental process for our countries' economies and constructs the image of the migrant as a hero who faces many dangers but will eventually reach the promised land. This discourse, when analysed from different angles, follows the same structure of the hero's journey that Joseph Campbell attributes to the founding myths of various cultures. Thus, we can say that migration is not just an event, but, in Central American countries, it is a myth reflecting the peculiarities of the countries. Migrating is a heroic act. It is going from an ordinary world to an extraordinary one, obtaining the elixir of wisdom and returning, at some point and in some way, to your native Ithaca after a long journey that has changed you and eventually changes those who stayed behind awaiting your return.

Then, there is a second narrative in the media, which expresses the exact opposite: migration is portrayed as a terrible danger. There is no need to migrate. It is a problem. It is an evil that should not be seen as a life project. Horrible things will happen to you: the *coyote* will lose you along the way, you will suffer sexual violence, you will come face to face with organised crime, and you could die in the desert. In this narrative, the media employs deeply religious language and imagery. You do not migrate; you leave in *exodus*. You do not arrive in the USA; you arrive in the *promised land*. Migrants move like a chosen people and *finally face the desert, like Jesus... for 40 days*. This type of news always features doom, evil, darkness and tragedy. Migrants, as victims, have less power to act or are often found dead. Recent coverage of this sort of narrative included reports on the fire at the Ciudad Juárez migrant station on March 27 2023. In that fire, 40 migrants lost their lives.

The media uses these two main narratives. The news is more a kind of dramatic story that can be an epic or a tragedy.

MC: Do the media ever address migration as a human right?

AM: Migration is not usually explained as a human right. That is because our countries are simultaneously countries of exit, transit, and reception, creating an ambivalent discourse on migration. For instance, in El Salvador, while we advocate for the rights of

our migrants to be respected, we often fail to respect the rights of Nicaraguans or exhibit discriminatory attitudes towards transcontinental migrants who are in transit to the US, the main receiving country.

I would like to emphasise one more reflection: since 2010, we have observed a quantitative decrease in the number of articles on migration. We believe this is because Central America and its media consider migration to be a commonplace situation in the region (by definition, news stories typically focus on extraordinary and significant events). The exceptional is always a great tragedy (a massacre, a shocking death) or a very particular success (a Central American migrant who becomes an entrepreneur, a prominent politician in their new country or a successful scientist). Migration has almost become a default topic when there are no other subjects to cover because every day, in each of our countries, people are leaving and on their way.

MC: What are the images of migration and its stereotypes in the media? What are the causes and consequences of the created images associated with criminality, with “invasion”, and with those “stealing” jobs?

AM: The stereotypes of “invasion” and “stealing jobs” are prevalent in the media of host countries but less so in Central America. In Mexico, discursive studies mention these stereotypes and also associate Central American women with “domestic workers” or “husband hunters”. In Europe, Jessica Retis has done some interesting work which shows that migrants are portrayed differently based on racialised appearance and aesthetics. For instance, in Spanish news coverage, Ecuadorians are depicted as poor and Indigenous people who steal jobs, and Colombians are linked with drug trafficking, contributing to insecurity and violence. In contrast, Argentinians are generally not stereotyped (Retis, 2004).

In the case of the Central American press, we can think of it as a semantic Cartesian plane. Stereotypes oscillate between success and failure, good and bad (here is an image of this that a fellow journalist helped me make; Figure 1). In the success quadrant, we have these migrants who thrive in other latitudes and are successful and good. We also have the “good losers”, who die along the way, are captured and kidnapped, and disappear. Then there are the bad stereotypes: the portrayal of deportees as criminals, *coyotes* as human traffickers, and in some cases, the “migra” (border police) of destination countries. About two decades ago, we conducted a study in the United States to find out what the media was saying about Salvadoran migration. We discovered there was very little information about these migrants, but many stereotypes were portrayed. We conducted a second study to analyse how migrants covered by Temporary Protected Status are portrayed in the media. There was a strong trend towards legitimising criminalisation, a trend reinforced with the arrival of Donald Trump. His rhetoric fuelled hate speech, the repercussions of which we are still trying to understand. His disinformation about the reality of migrant workers fostered a discourse of persecution and singling out,

leading to the construction of stereotypes that dehumanise. This discourse has tangible effects in everyday life, contributing to the mistreatment of workers and prompting various targeted attacks against Latino population groups or migrant groups at large.

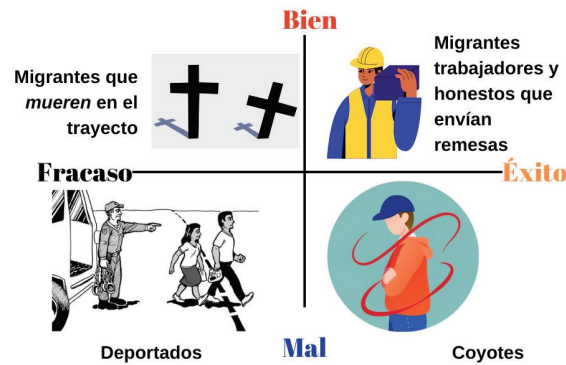


Figure 1. Stereotypes

Note: Translation:

	Good		
Failure	Migrants who die during the journey	Hard-working, honest migrants who send money	Success
	Deported	Coyotes	
	Bad		

MC: What prevailing discourses or narratives do governments and media in the region adopt regarding migration?

AM: Unfortunately, the United States and other destination countries often dictate the narratives adopted by different governments in Central America. Central American governments tend to be particularly condescending towards border militarisation policies and the persecution of their own migrants. During Donald Trump’s term in office, the governments of Honduras, El Salvador, and Guatemala signed agreements to designate themselves as “safe countries” and established their own “border police” forces to prevent the movement of migrants from outside the continent or from the south. The president of El Salvador, Nayib Bukele, for instance, publicly apologised and accepted responsibility for the tragic deaths of Oscar Martínez, 25, and his 23-month-old daughter, who drowned while attempting to cross the Rio Grande. Of course, none of these leaders denounce how political decisions have historically constructed processes of border securitisation. They fail to acknowledge that it is easier for a crate of avocados to cross the region and reach the United States, thanks to free trade agreements, whereas this journey becomes nearly impossible for a family, who will also face many risks that could have been avoided.

As I have previously mentioned, the majority of the media merely echo the discourse of governments, which tend to insist that “migration is a problem and we must try to avoid it”. Each government, in turn, considers it a success that they have managed to reduce migration, which reflects its commitment to agreements with the United States.

MC: Are there any media outlets or specialised channels dedicated to providing information about the migration process?

AM: Some international cooperation agencies and governmental organisations tend to make more complex reflections on this issue and, of course, academia. I would like to highlight, for example, José Luis Rocha (2019, 2022; Rocha et al., 2023), a prominent sociologist in the region, who has extensively analysed migration and theorised about one of the ideas that we in Central America have been thinking about for a long time: understanding migration as a process of civil disobedience. This concept, this category, comes from US civil society and calls for disobedience to unjust, immoral orders. Civil disobedience applies to territories like ours, where the entire international community tells us not to migrate, where cooperation projects tell us not to migrate, but people do it systematically. They disobey all the voices of the media in the host countries and of their own governments, who pressure them, and set off in search of a different future driven by the hope glimpsed through everyday life experiences.

The mainstream media, the most widely read, typically refrain from reporting on such issues because they tend to rely on government officials and international cooperation as their primary source of analysis. Alternative media and grassroots media outlets have emerged on the media scene and are building a different discourse.

MC: Some fictional works created in the region, like the *telenovela* (soap opera) “Loma Verde” produced by the Luciérnaga collective in Nicaragua with the support of international cooperation, explore narratives that aim to inform and raise awareness about the challenges of migration, such as fatalities during the journey, mistreatment, rape and sexual exploitation of women, incarceration, deportation... This series was broadcast in all the countries of the region, on private and even public channels, achieving notable audience success, and it seems that the public experienced it as part of their own daily reality. Although, in this case, there are no studies to prove the effects on the population, the audiovisual work’s ability to raise awareness was evident. Lidia Peralta (2016) describes this vividly when she examines cinema and migration in-depth, albeit in a different geographical context. You mentioned a similar phenomenon in music production.

AM: Music is one of the mechanisms that most mobilise the Central American population. Its consumption continues to increase, and many local groups have created songs based on different rhythms that tell stories of everyday life and that collect and recover these stories. The genres vary between pop, hip hop and, above all, *corrido*.

Mexican group Los Tigres del Norte, for instance, encapsulates many migrant experiences in songs like “El Centroamericano,” a *corrido* that tells how many migrants have to learn to speak like Mexicans to navigate deportation to Mexico and quickly re-enter the United States. Or the *corrido* “Tres Veces Mojado”¹, a second national anthem for many Salvadorans. Music also supports protests and advocacy for Hispanic community rights in host countries, as evidenced by songs like “La Bamba Rebelde” by Las Cafeteras, a band formed in 2006 by a group of children of migrants who met in music and dance classes at the Eastside Café cultural centre in Los Angeles (USA). Music about migration tends to be less stereotypical, less tragic and much more active than traditional news coverage in the mainstream media.

MC: What communication channels foster trust among migrants and between migrants and their families?

AM: One of the most common channels is Facebook Messenger. Within this virtual network, closed groups are often created to unite specific populations from small territories like municipalities, villages, or cantons. This resource significantly influences families. There are also private television channels, often funded by diasporas, which communicate and tell stories about migrants to the communities of origin and from the communities of origin to the migrants (television channels from Intipucá to Washington D.C., for example). Personal networks like WhatsApp, Telegram, and Signal are also widely used, but Facebook remains predominant. Recently, TikTok has emerged as an increasingly important platform for information or what appears to be informative content.

MC: Considering the challenges and abuses faced by migrants during their journeys, including labour exploitation, what communication practices and guidelines could effectively contribute to better solutions for issues related to migration?

AM: Some experiences provide a good answer to this question. I would highlight the experience of the National Day Laborer Organizing Network of the USA, which, since

¹ “Tres Veces Mojado” (Los Tigres del Norte, 1988; lyrics by Enrique Manuel Franco):

“When I left my land, El Salvador/ With the intention of reaching the United States/ I knew I'd need more than courage/
I knew I might fall by the wayside/ Three borders I've had to cross/ Through three countries I've walked without papers/
Three times I've had to risk my life/ That's why they say I'm three times wet.

In Guatemala and Mexico when I crossed/ I escaped being taken prisoner twice/ The same language and colour, think
about it/ How can they call me a foreigner?

In Central America, given its situation, both political and/ Financial, for many, there is no other solution but to abandon/
Their homeland, perhaps forever; the Mexican takes two steps/ And here he is, today they send him away, and the next day
he's back/ It's a luxury I can't afford without/ Being killed or taken prisoner.

Mexico is beautiful, but how much I've suffered/ Crossing it without papers is very hard/ The five thousand kilometres I've
travelled/ I can say I remember every single one/ Arizona they told me to cross/ And that I should go through the middle
of the desert/ Luckily, a Mexican called Juan gave me his hand/ Otherwise I'd be dead.

Now that I've finally got legal status/ I've overcome a lot of what I suffered/ I dedicate my song to the wet ones/ And to
those who, like me, are three times wet”.

the mid-1990s, has systematically engaged in grassroots communication efforts through music and radio to teach the migrant community how to defend their rights and understand the processes, how to get their employer to pay them, how to take legal action if they have not received the corresponding payment or if some kind of abuse has been committed, including physical abuse. Popular education and communication processes, through organisations like National Day Laborer Organizing Network and other entities linked to Central American organisations, make a positive contribution to building communities aware of their rights and empowered to be agents of their own development towards a more dignified and humane future.

MC: What is the focus of attention on communication? Can public policies be implemented to support grassroots and community media and ensure the sustainability of independent media?

AM: Evidently, communication in Central America cannot progress without policies that promote broader discursive inclusion and ensure the visibility of diverse voices and experiences. Unfortunately, we are witnessing a regression in communication policies in the region. The most authoritarian governments (Nicaragua and El Salvador) have amplified government voices, and not only are there no policies supporting grassroots and independent media, but there are also no policies that safeguard audiences from the work of network centres that reinforce hate speech, exacerbate polarisation, and feed prejudice.

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BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

Manuel Chaparro Escudero is a professor of journalism at the Faculty of Communication Sciences at the University of Malaga. He is the author of monographs such as *Claves Para Repensar los Medios y el Mundo que Habitamos: La Distopía del Desarrollo* (Keys to Rethinking the Media and the World We Live In: The Dystopia of Development); *Guía de Transición Ecosocial y Principios Éticos Para Nuestros Medios* (Guide to Ecosocial Transition and Ethical Principles for Our Media; co-authored); and *Comunicación Radical. Depatriarcalizar, Decolonizar y Ecologizar la Cultura Mediática* (Radical Communication. Depatriarchalising, Decolonising and Ecologising Media Culture), co-authored with Susana de Andrés. He has collaborated on communication projects and supported projects to reform public communication policies in Argentina, Bolivia, Colombia, Chile, El Salvador, Guatemala, Brazil, Haiti, Peru and the Dominican Republic. He was a consultant for the Spanish Agency for International Development Cooperation in Bolivia and Guatemala, and on audiovisual market reform policies for the government of Andalusia. He researches communication and post-development, decolonial narratives and public policies. He runs the Communication and Culture Laboratory group (LABCOM-Andalusia). He was director and founder of the public and community media network EMA-RTV and Onda Local Andalucía (1984-2021).

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