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La Caminata del Migrante: a social movement

Rosario de la Luz Rizzo Lara ^{a,b}

^aBrussels School of International Studies, University of Kent, Bruxelles, Belgium; ^bInstitut für Englische Philologie, Freie Universität Berlin, Berlin, Germany

ABSTRACT

The literature on the October 2018 caravan from Central America to the US has offered different interpretations of the phenomenon. Some studies look at it as a strategy for mobility, others as an exodus, and others as a collective action. I synthesise these perspectives to advance the conceptualisation of the caravan to account for its main features. To do so, I perform a case study of the caravan based on a literature review and a secondary qualitative analysis. Drawing on the concept of Social Movements, this article first proposes the conceptualisation of the caravan as a social movement—understanding the different features of the caravan as axes of a social movement. Then, the article introduces the concept of *'transnational social movements on the move'* to account for the innovations in the space and repertoires of contention and diffusion. The case study shows that the 2018 Caravan is a transnational social movement on the move composed of purposive migrants from different nationalities moving collectively across countries to challenge a system of authority at the local and international level using innovative repertoires of contention.

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Introduction

Extant literature has interpreted the October 2018 caravan of migrants from Central America to the US in various ways. Some scholars see it as a new strategy for mobility vis-à-vis the strict immigration policies and border regimes implemented in Mexico and the US (Castro Neira 2019; Gandini, Fernández de la Reguera, and Narváez Gutiérrez 2020; Salazar Araya 2019; Torre Cantalapiedra and Mariscal Nava 2020). NGOs called the caravan an exodus of refugees (Colectivo de Observación y Monitoreo de Derechos Humanos en el Sureste Mexicano 2019). Other scholars deem it as an *'acuerpamiento en movimiento'* (embodied movement) (Cordero Díaz and Garibo García 2019; Garibo García and Call 2020), the gathering of bodies to face risks associated with the violence(s) and obstacles migrants encounter along the journey after the imposition of restrictive immigration policies. Lastly, Varela Huerta and McLean (2019) understand the caravan as a migrant struggle. They claim the caravan is a rebellion, an insurgency

CONTACT Rosario de la Luz Rizzo Lara  rdr9@kent.ac.uk

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of the victims of neoliberalism in Central America, and an insurrection against the border regime that the countries of the region have imposed (Varela Huerta and McLean 2019, 166).

Elaborating on these perspectives, I seek to advance a conceptualisation of the caravan that synthesises different perspectives to account for some of its features, such as its composition; the conflictual relationships that are established; the caravan's mobilisation strategy; and the organisation and planning that went into mobilising and sustaining the movement. The case study is based on a literature review and secondary qualitative analysis. Building on the concept of social movements (Snow et al. 2019b) and Varela Huerta and McLean's (2019) definition of the caravan as a migrant struggle, this article proposes the conceptualisation of the caravan as a social movement – understanding the different features of the caravan as axes of a social movement. Social movements consist of collective actions carried out by purposive actors, with some degree of organisation and planning, who use spaces for other purposes from which they are intended, challenge a system of authority, and aim at some sort of transformation (Della Porta and Diani 2006; Snow et al. 2019b).

The article contributes to Social Movements literature threefold: (a) by showing how a particular form of migration – caravans – can be best analysed as a social movement and thus use that literature to analyse it; (b) by extending the literature on spaces and repertoires of contention, and diffusion; and (c) by proposing a new type of social movement, '*transnational social movement on the move*'. Similarly, it contributes to Migration literature by analysing migration in collectives, *en masse*, and providing insights into how migrants organise themselves collectively to contest border management and governmentality.

The article is divided into three sections. First, I review the literature on the caravan and Social Movements. Second, I apply Snow et al.'s (2019b) conceptualisation of social movements to analyse four axes of the caravan. Third, I introduce the concept of '*transnational social movement on the move*' (TSMOTM) that calls for a rethinking of spaces and repertoires of contention, networks, and processes of diffusion. I conclude by showing that the October 2018 caravan was a TSMOTM and how migration scholarship can benefit from incorporating social movements' tools to analyse migration phenomena.

Theoretical framework

Defining the caravan

Academics, NGOs, and journalists have provided different perspectives to understand the October 2018 caravan. First, migration scholars have conceptualised the caravan as a new strategy for mobility and safety in light of the restrictive immigration policies that Mexico and the US have implemented since the 1990s (Castro Neira 2019; Salazar Araya 2019; Torre Cantalapiedra and Mariscal Nava 2020). These authors observe that migrants used the caravan to travel more safely, given the increased violence they experience in transit. The caravan also provided emotional support and information. Torre Cantalapiedra and Mariscal Nava (2020) note that the caravan is a strategy for migration for low-income migrants who lack the economic resources to hire a smuggler and afford the trip. Salazar Araya (2019) shows the caravan is a strategy for the mobility of family

groups, who avoid leaving family members behind while ensuring protection in transit. Other scholars have deemed the caravan an '*acuerpamiento en movimiento*' (embodied movement) (Cordero Díaz and Garibo García 2019; Garibo García and Call 2020). That is, the gathering of bodies, knowledge, and demands to face the risks, violence(s), and obstacles encountered along the journey. Garibo García and Call (2020) argue the results of this embodied movement were recognised as migrants were able to mobilise to openly contest the border regime that confines, classifies, and selects migrants.

Second, NGOs called the caravan an 'exodus' (Colectivo de Observación y Monitoreo de Derechos Humanos en el Sureste Mexicano 2019). NGOs asserted the caravan was composed of Central American migrants and refugees fleeing poverty, insecurity, violence, and political instability. Mainly, they were leaving Honduras, a country with one of the highest murder rates in Latin America, where 50 percent of the population live in poverty, and that faced great political turmoil after the coup d'état in 2009 and three electoral frauds in the last twelve years (Sosa 2015; Sosa and Irías 2018). Similarly, *El Faro*, a newspaper that followed the caravan since it left San Pedro Sula, called the group a 'refugee camp' (Martínez 2018b).

Third, a growing body of literature has looked at the caravan as a collective action (Varela Huerta and McLean 2019). Varela Huerta and McLean (2019) understand the caravan as a migrant struggle, a migrant-led protest and a rebellion; an insurgency of the victims of neoliberalism in Central America, and an insurrection against the border regime that the countries of the region have imposed (Varela Huerta and McLean 2019, 166).

Elaborating on these conceptualizations, I argue that the caravan is not only a strategy for mobility, an exodus, or collective action but a fully-fledged social movement. Limiting the analysis to understand it exclusively as one or the other would fail to fully grasp its significance, the meanings of the demonstrations, the strategies displayed to organise and sustain it, the political relevance, and the movement's disruptive character. While the caravan was indeed a strategy to move safely, it was also a collective effort to contest the border regime and reclaim mobility, security, and labour rights.

I analyse the caravan through the lens of Social Movements as it offers tools to study different aspects of the caravan. Migration literature has primarily focused on studying individual, household, or small-group migration, as opposed to migration in collectives (Díaz de León 2020; París Pombo 2017; Torre Cantalapiedra and Mariscal Nava 2020). Additionally, traditional approaches to migration (i.e. Neoclassic, New Economics of Migration, or World Systems) are structuralists or rational and have overlooked migrants' political subjectivity (Massey et al. 1993; Sassen 1988). Instead, Autonomy of Migration (AoM) moved away from such approaches, prioritising the subjective dimensions of migration rather than the structural excess that characterises it, while recognising the social, legal, and economic structures that frame migratory experiences (Casas-Cortes et al. 2015; Cobarrubias, Cortes, and Pickles 2011). Further, AoM understands borders as something that can be defied and transgressed; a space of contestation between the State apparatus that denies migrants' rights and mobility, and the set of skills, desires, resources, behaviours, and subjective practices of migrants (Basok and Candiz 2020; Cobarrubias, Cortes, and Pickles 2011). Though this approach offers tools to grasp the migrants' political subjectivity and the conflictual relationship with borders, it has yet to account for other caravan

elements, such as the group formation, repertoire of contention, and the caravan's mobilisation strategy and organisation. Thus, this case study contributes to AoM by showing how migrants organise themselves to (a) migrate collectively; and (b) to collectively contest a system of authority at the local and international levels.

Defining social movements

Social movements are generally brought about by discontent with existing conditions, whether economic, political, ideological, or other. Historically, changes in structures and societies have been a product of social movements because social movements rely on the idea that societies are a human product and, as such, can be transformed (Buechler 2011).

According to Snow et al. (2019b, 10), social movements are

collectivities acting with some degree of organization and continuity outside of institutional or organizational channels for the purpose of challenging or defending extant authority, whether it is institutionally or culturally based in the group, organization, society, culture or world order of which they are a part.

The definition encompasses four axes: collective action, challenger to or defending of existing authority, organised activity, and existing with some temporal continuity.

- (a) Social movements as a form of collective action. Social movements are one form of collective action. Collective action refers to 'any goal-directed activity engaged in jointly by two or more individuals, that is, people working together in some fashion for a variety of reasons, often including the belief that doing so enhances the prospect of achieving the objective' (Snow et al. 2019b, 5). They generally use non-institutionalized means of action, such as the use of public space for purposes other than for which they were designated, and can instigate inside the government, religious institutions, schools, corporations, financial organisations, and others.
- (b) Social movements as challengers to or defending of existing authority. Social movements consist of purposive actors that collectively challenge an authority (system of authority) in an attempt to bring about social change (Della Porta and Diani 2006). While authors have not agreed on what type of change is pursued with social movements (whether overall change or change in the political arena) (Snow et al. 2019a), there is consensus that social movements aim for transformation (Martin 2015). Snow et al. (2019b, 7) argue that social movements challenge or defend an existing *institutional authority* – whether located in the political, corporate, religious, or educational realm (original emphasis). Eugenio Sosa argued that 'social movements usually look at power as a central element of their popular fights openly and visibly' (Sosa 2015, 7).
- (c) Social movements as an organised activity. Social movements require some degree of organisation (tight or loose) and different forms of organisations (SMOs). Social movements are not spontaneous but instead planned and organised and the product of 'fertilizing ideas' amongst people (Denardo 1985). The framing alignment process (Snow et al. 1986, 2019a) and the collective action frames (Benford and Snow 2000) articulated by organisers are significantly essential to initiate and sustain the movement. Whether movements are organised by local, international organisations or are

self-organised, leaders are central for the advancement of grievances, claims, and the movement's overall success (McAdam 1999; Meyer 2004).

- (d) Social movements as existing with some temporal continuity. To bring about change, some sort of organised, sustained activity is necessary. Of course, there is variability in the life course of a movement, as some are short while others persist across generations alternating between periods of heightened activism and inactivity (such as the Civil Rights movement) (Snow et al. 2019b). Whatever the case may be, sustained collective actions and continuity are essential to social movements.

This conceptualisation is broad enough to encompass various actions. I elaborate on it to analyse '*La Caminata del Migrante*' as a social movement. First, I provide a background to inform how the Caminata developed. Then, I demonstrate how it fits Snow's definition of a social movement. Finally, I elaborate on the caravan's transnational and mobile character to suggest a new type of movement, a '*transnational social movement on the move*' since most social movements are circumscribed to a country, and literature has yet to account for movements 'on the move'.

La Caminata del Migrante: A social movement

In the fall of 2018, a new social movement, '*La Caminata del Migrante*', was formed in Honduras. On October 12, 2018, around 200 Hondurans gathered at the bus station in San Pedro Sula to trek together to the US (Arroyo et al. 2018; Pradilla 2019). Since mid-September, a flyer had circulated through social media for people to join the '*Caminata del Migrante*' (Parlow 2018; Varela Huerta and McLean 2019). The flyer stated the time and place of departure, along with the statement, '*No nos vamos por que queremos, nos expulsa la violencia y la pobreza*' (We are not leaving because we want to; we are driven out by violence and poverty) (see Figure 1). As the group moved forward, hundreds of Hondurans, Guatemalans, Salvadorans, and Nicaraguans joined the group. A week later, on October 19th, more than 5,000 people arrived at the Mexico-Guatemala border demanding a 'free pass' through Mexico (Ahmed, Rogers, and Ernst 2018; Colectivo de Observación y Monitoreo de Derechos Humanos en el Sureste Mexicano 2019; El Colegio de la Frontera Norte 2018). In the following days, four more groups formed in El Salvador and Honduras arrived at the Mexico-Guatemala border with the same purpose (El Colegio de la Frontera Norte 2018). Despite the difficulties faced in transit, including clashes with the police (Prensa 2018), harsh weather conditions, and travelling in very precarious conditions, on November 11, 2018, after travelling about 3,000 km, the first group of migrants arrived at the northern border in Tijuana, Mexico (Colectivo de Observación y Monitoreo de Derechos Humanos en el Sureste Mexicano 2019; El Colegio de la Frontera Norte 2018, 2019). In the weeks that followed, thousands of migrants and asylum seekers arrived in Tijuana and many more to Mexico. Throughout 2019, 2020, and 2021 more groups have been formed in Central America to arrive in the US. These groups were labelled 'Caravans' (Gandini, Fernández de la Reguera, and Narváez Gutiérrez 2020; Martínez 2018b; Torre Cantalapiedra and Mariscal Nava 2020; Varela Huerta and McLean 2019).

Central Americans, who for years had been experiencing violence, forced disappearances, robberies, arbitrary detention, fast track deportations, and human rights violations

while crossing Mexico (MSF 2017; París Pombo 2017; Sorensen 2013), walked together demanding the Mexican government to allow them to cross the country, to stay there or reach the US-Mexico border to apply for asylum. In other words, these groups organised, mobilised, expressed their grievances and claims as a social movement.

La Caminata del Migrante as a form of collective action

The caravan is collective action to the extent that people were working together with the belief that doing so would enhance the prospect of achieving their objective (Snow et al. 2019b). Two goals can be distinguished in the caravan: collective and individual. As a collective, thousands of people walked together to arrive in the US and Mexico safely; in doing so, they denounced the Honduran government (Gandini, Fernández de la Reguera, and Narváez Gutiérrez 2020; Garibo García and Call 2020; Varela Huerta and McLean 2019). They travelled collectively, as a more significant number of people would enhance the prospect of achieving their goal. Together, they would mitigate the risks, dangers, and violence in the transit. Also, it would diminish the costs of travelling, as they would avoid the need for a *coyote*, bribing officials, and the extortions along the way. For example, a woman expressed *‘Yo sola no me atrevía a aventarme al agua [...] Pero en caravana es distinto, un leño solo no arde, arde en montón’* (I did not dare to jump into the water alone [...] But it is different in a caravan, a log does not burn alone, it burns in a pile) (Gandini, Fernández de la Reguera, and Narváez Gutiérrez 2020, 30). As for the individual goals, they were as heterogeneous as the participants, insofar that the goals of leaders, organisers, and the participants might have been different. Hence, the individual goals were mixed, while there was commonality in the collective aim.

The caravans served as an umbrella organisation that welcomed the migratory projects of people from different nationalities, genders, and sexual orientations. The caravan’s demographic composition showed it was a broad movement, as people of all ages participated. It was particularly notable the presence of children and adolescents, elders, family groups, single men, pregnant women, and people from the LGBTI community (Cappelli 2020; El Colegio de la Frontera Norte 2018, 2019; Gandini, Fernández de la Reguera, and Narváez Gutiérrez 2020; Salazar Araya 2019).

Collective actions are formed of purposive actors. Migrants are purposive actors who challenge, with their bodies, the system of exclusion that the US and Mexico have imposed. Migrants are political actors whose acts of disobedience, autonomy, and micro-political resistance contest border governance and management (Castro Neira 2019). Central American migrants who have been historically forced to migrate clandestinely (París Pombo 2017) took the streets to (re)claim their freedom of movement, labour rights, and demanded security along the way (Garibo García and Call 2020). When migrants arrived at Tecún Umán (Mexico-Guatemala border), they chanted *‘De aquí no nos vamos hasta que nos dejen pasar’* (We are not leaving, until you let us in) (Camhaji 2018a, para. 1); and *‘Aquí estamos, y no nos vamos, y si nos echan, nos regresamos’* (Here we are, we are not leaving, and if you kick us out, we are going to comeback) (Martínez 2018c, para. 8). Upon their arrival in Tapachula, they echoed, *‘Ya estamos en México y no vamos a parar’* (We are in Mexico and we are not going to stop) (Rojas 2018, para. 50). They also uttered, ‘we are not criminals, we are international workers’ (Pradilla 2019, 118), contesting negative views towards unauthorised migration.

In the words of journalist Alberto Pradilla, the caravan was an ‘exercise of massive civil disobedience’ (Pradilla 2019, 277) that brought to light the effects of clandestine migration and enabled migrants to cross the borders collectively and safely while contesting unfair laws. The discourses, strategies, and actions that migrants employed before, during, and after the first caravan imply a self-constitution and self-representation that breaks with the historical and hegemonic image of migrants as victims (Salazar Araya 2019). The image of the recipient of humanitarian aid is transformed into one of the political actors.

Further, migrants are political actors as they contest and are confronted with States’ power (Casas-Cortes et al. 2015). Their struggles become politicised as they demand political attention and policy action (Azmanova 2020). Here, the political subjectivity is created by the actions of those ‘who did not exist before’ as Hannah Arendt stated (2006, 150), by individuals acting in freedom, a freedom that ‘was not given, not even as an object of cognition or imagination’ but that accounts for the capacity of new beginnings and performance of the political (Beltrán 2009). This is possible because ‘even those deprived of rights, those who are indeed unrepresentable, are [...] capable of opening up political spaces for enactments and verifications of equality (Dikeç 2013, 87).

Echoing Carmen Beltrán’s (2009) and Mustafa Dikeç’s (2013) argument concerning the mobilisation of undocumented workers in 2006 in the US and the ‘*sans papiers*’ in France, respectively, migrant-led social movements create a political space that did not exist before. The caravan opened new political spaces and created new subjectivities. This form of the organisation speaks to a strategy to overcome the obstacles imposed by states while also informs about the actions, knowledge, strategies, and tactics that migrants employ to self-organise politically and subjectively (Salazar Araya 2019, 125). By taking the streets, highways, parks, and international bridges, noncitizens challenged the dehumanising effects of anonymity and illegality and thus created relational spaces of freedom that were nonexistent (Beltrán 2009). Such movement was politically distinctive and disruptive.

La Caminata del Migrante as a challenger to an existing authority

Social movements consist of purposive actors that collectively challenge an authority to bring about social change and transformation. Della Porta and Diani (2006, 21) argue that collective actions are conflictual to the extent that there is ‘an oppositional relationship between actors that seek control of the same stake’; that is to say, that if the demands are met, it will damage the interests of others. In the case of the caravan, two conflictual relationships are established (1) between the Honduran State and its citizens; and (2) between State’s apparatus that denies migrant’s rights to mobility, labour, safety, and the migrants that resist, challenge, and contest the authority. In other words, there is a conflictual relationship at the local and international levels.

First, there is a conflictual relationship between the Honduran State and its citizens. La Caminata del Migrante was a tool to show discontent with the local politics. On the one hand, political figures in Honduras used the caravan for political motives. Representative Luis Redondo and former representative Bartolo Fuentes posted a flyer on social media with information about the caravan (see Figure 1). Fuentes’ appendage to the flyer showed fault attribution and political denunciation (Cappelli 2020). He stated he

would walk along with the caravan, condemned the longstanding poverty and insecurity in Honduras, and asked people to denounce these problems publicly, adding that those who protest are persecuted. Similarly, Redondo shared the flyer decrying the government, blaming it for the exodus of thousands of people. He argued migration was a consequence of corruption, insecurity, and impunity (Ahmed, Rogers, and Ernst 2018; Cappelli 2020). He had previously posted several messages on his Facebook account blaming Honduras' President Juan Orlando Hernández (JOH) and the National Party for the country's situation. Former president Manuel Zelaya also condemned JOH's government on Twitter.

On the other hand, Hondurans used the caravan to denounce JOH's administration. They talked about the country's critical situation reflected in high unemployment rates, poverty, violence, corruption, and impunity. For instance, a 31-year-old man commented '*Es que nos gobierna una basura. Yo he visto ya varios presidentes, pero ninguno tan basura como este*' (Our government is garbage. I have seen a lot of presidents, but none as crappy as this one') (Martínez 2018a, para. 22). Other people commented: '*Avanzo indignada, harta de todos los problemas que nos ha dado nuestro Gobierno*' (I walk outraged, fed up by all the problems the government has given us) (Camhaji 2018b, 2); '*En nuestro país no tenemos futuro. Llegar a Estados Unidos es una cuestión de vida o muerte*' (In our country we do not have a future. Arriving to the US is a matter of life-or-death) (Rojas 2018, para. 34).



Figure 1. A flyer circulated to call people to join the 'Caminata del Migrante'. Source: Fuentes (2018).

The coup d'état in 2009 generated waves of mobilizations and protests against the government –the President, Congress, oligarchy, and the local media (Sosa 2015). During 150 days, people took the streets to protest in San Pedro Sula and other cities. One of the largest mobilizations occurred on Independence Day –September 15, 2009–when about one million people protested across the country (Sosa 2015, 38). The mobilizations paved the way for reconfiguring the electoral system and creating new political parties (Sosa 2015; Sosa and Iriás 2018). In the 2013 election, candidates of the novel political parties got a high share of the votes; however, there were several irregularities during the electoral process, suggesting a fraud had been orchestrated; thus, the results of the elections were contested (Sosa 2014, 2015). In 2017, with a renewed coalition, the opposition contended for the presidency, but the result again favoured the incumbent president Juan Orlando Hernandez (Sosa 2018). The Organization of American States recognised there were irregularities in the process and called for new elections (OAS 2017). Nevertheless, the Honduran Supreme Court disregarded the recommendations and formally declared JOH as president for a second term. The outcome once more drove people to mobilise against the ruling party, the president, and the institutions (Sosa 2018; Sosa and Iriás 2018), and in doing so, they were highly repressed. In 2018, Hondurans expressed '*sentimos que ya no tenemos espacios públicos para expresar nuestro descontento con la situación del país*' (We feel that we no longer have public spaces to express our discontent with the situation of the country) (Sosa and Iriás 2018, 29).

The protests in Honduras have targeted the electoral system and the economic, security, education, health, and environmental sectors, demanding accountability and transparency in managing the resources, given the high levels of corruption, impunity, and violence (Sosa 2014, 2015). Hondurans for years have done public demonstrations, strikes, marches, assemblies and have taken the streets, squares, and buildings (Sosa 2014), but in doing so, they have been highly repressed. In other words, Hondurans have used an extensive repertoire of contention (Della Porta 2013; Tilly 1986). Charles Tilly put forward the concept of a 'repertoire of contention' to show the different actions people undertake when they want to oppose a public decision or consider something threatening or unjust (Della Porta 2013).

The caravan emerged when the protests had not had the effect intended. The repertoire of contention had been routinised, lost efficacy, and the people's demands (as expressed through demonstrations and the electoral system) had not been met. Hence, Hondurans scaled up their actions to express their discontent calling the international community's attention (Kriesi 2016). Throughout the walk, migrants expressed that the government was corrupt, it did not provide employment opportunities, and there was a lot of violence (Escalón 2018; Gandini, Fernández de la Reguera, and Narváz Gutiérrez 2020; HCH Televisión Digital 2018; Martínez 2018b; Varela Huerta and McLean 2019). People expressed: '*En Honduras ya es imposible vivir; ahí no se aguanta. No hay trabajo, no hay dinero y en todas partes están las maras*' (It is impossible to live in Honduras, we cannot live like this, there are no jobs, no money, and gangs are everywhere) (Martínez 2018a, para. 22). While walking, migrants echoed loudly '*Fuera Juan Orlando Hernández*' (Out Juan Orlando Hernandez) (Garibo García and Call 2020; Varela Huerta and McLean 2019), a chant that first resonated during massive demonstrations in Honduras after the 2017 electoral fraud (Sosa 2018).

While advancing, the caravan gained members, media attention, and coverage. The Honduran Ministry of Foreign Affairs made a press release stating the caravan was a political movement aimed at ‘altering our country’s governability, stability, and peace’ (Secretaría de Relaciones Exteriores y Cooperación Internacional 2018, paras. 2–3). It suggested that political sectors had organised the movement with fake promises to grant a humanitarian visa to cross Mexico and seek asylum in the US. The Honduran government urged its citizens to go back to Honduras; however, Hondurans continued their walk towards Mexico and instead formed more caravans in the country and El Salvador. In other words, the caravan became politicised as it demanded political attention and policy action.

Second, migrants challenged the border regime and immigration policies in Mexico and the US. Because of the large-scale immigration to the US from Central America – mainly from Honduras, Guatemala, and El Salvador– during the 1990s, the US and Mexico collaborated on a series of programmes¹ to curb undocumented migration. The cooperation included the training of Mexican officers, information exchange, establishing checkpoints along the transit corridors, and the deportation of those intercepted (Frelick 1991). In the 2000s, the collaboration has continued under different programmes. The goal has been to increase and spread security controls across the border with Guatemala and Belize, so mobile checkpoints in unofficial points of entry, typically placed along highways, have been installed in the southern states of Mexico –Veracruz, Tabasco, Chiapas, and Oaxaca (París Pombo 2017; Torre-Cantalapiedra and Yee-Quintero 2018). The Mexican government also installed surveillance devices –infrared cameras– and built detention facilities across the country, having 25 facilities in 2000, 52 in 2005, and 65 in 2020 (INM 2020).

Since the 1990s, the US has also enacted a series of policies and enforcement strategies² to curb unauthorised migration from Mexico and Central America (Vogt 2020). The actions have included the fortification of the Southern border through the deployment of thousands of Border Patrol officers; construction of the wall across the southern border; building of several detention facilities; raids to detain undocumented migrants and with that mass incarceration and deportation; the re-introduction of migrant family detention and family separation; the reduction of the number of refugees and permanent residents; and implementation of laws that criminalise migration and deny migrants human rights (Frelick 1991; Guerette and Clarke 2005; Torres 2018). In other words, the US immigration strategy went from detaining undocumented migrants once inside the US to ‘territorial denial’ or ‘prevention through deterrence’ (Nevins 2003, 173). The latter prevented migrants from entering the US and shifted unauthorised flows into desolated areas through the deployment of Border Patrol agents, the fortification of physical barriers, and electronic surveillance (De Leon 2015; Guerette and Clarke 2005; Nevins 2003).

The effects of such immigration policies and cooperation programmes have had negative consequences for undocumented migrants. First, it increased apprehensions and fast-track deportations in Mexico and the US; for instance, Central American apprehensions increased by 85 percent after implementing the Southern Border Program in 2014 (Vogt 2020). Second, it increased human smuggling. Third, asylum claims skyrocketed in Mexico (from 1,296 in 2013 to 70,609 in 2019) (COMAR 2020). Forth, violence heightened as the drug cartels and the organised crime bribe, kidnap, extort, rape,

and kill migrants in Mexico, often in coordination with Mexican officers. In 2017, *Médicos Sans Frontières* (MSF) reported that more than 68 percent of the Central American migrants and refugees interviewed suffered physical violence, while 31.4 percent of women and 17.2 percent of men were sexually abused during their transit through Mexico (MSF 2017). Finally, there has been a dramatic rise in the number of deaths given the divergent routes that migrants are pushed to take through the desert and the wild (De Leon 2015; París Pombo 2017; Vogt 2020).

The contestation to the border regime occurs at and beyond the border (Casas-Cortes et al. 2015). Borders are a space of contestation and negotiation, defiance, and resistance, between the State apparatus that denies migrants' rights and mobility and the set of skills, desires, resources, behaviours, and subjective practices of migrants (Basok and Candiz 2020; Cobarrubias, Cortes, and Pickles 2011). The borderlands, Sabine Hess writes, 'are the product of the collectivized excessive will to subvert and pass the border, of the networks of people on the move, and shared knowledge practices of border-crossing' (Hess 2017, 96). Notably, the caravans used public spaces -highways, parks, churches, avenues, and international borders- outside the territoriality of their members' nations to protest publicly, which accounts for the use of transnational public space to contest the border regime.

Further, the caravan used the repertoire of contention (Tilly 1986) that other conventional cultural or political movements use, such as marches, demonstrations, strikes, public meetings, performances, and civil disobedience acts (Escudero and Pallares 2020). For example, the caravan's repertoire included strikes, press releases, press conferences, *plantones* (sit-in), marches in transnational spaces, and some performative actions seeking to appeal to civil society. More importantly, the caravan itself became an innovation to the repertoire of contention to protest and condemn injustices.

With public protest, migrants sought to draw the public's attention to their grievances, create controversy where there was none, and obtain public support (Kriesi 2016, 71). The caravan served as an opportunity to spotlight migrants' grievances: conditions at their home countries, transit, and destination. Their walk *en masse* made visible their struggles while putting them at the centre of the public political life from which they have been historically excluded (Salazar Araya 2019, 131).

Here, the public's overall positive response to the caravan is notable. When the caravan arrived in Guatemala and Mexico, NGOs, activists, and civil society showed signs of solidarity, welcoming migrants and refugees, offering them housing, clothing, food, and medical aid (Basok and Candiz 2020; Gandini, Fernández de la Reguera, and Narváez Gutiérrez 2020). However, when migrants arrived in Tijuana, some communities disapproved of their presence (CNN Español 2018).

La Caminata del Migrante as an organised activity

Like other social movements, the caravan required some organisation and planning. First, there was a call to participate in the caravan in September 2018 (Parlow 2018; Varela Huerta and McLean 2019). Bartolo Fuentes and others had circulated a flyer stating the date and place of departure. Hondurans created Facebook and WhatsApp groups (across the country) where people organised themselves to arrive at the time and place of departure (HCH Televisión Digital 2018; Pradilla 2019). The buzz about

the caravan grew to the point that radio and television reported on it (Cappelli 2020; Gandini, Fernández de la Reguera, and Narváez Gutiérrez 2020; Parlow 2018; Pradilla 2019). Thus, most participants found out about the caravan through social media, radio, and television. Moreover, local television programmes broadcasted the moment of departure, which further bolstered people's participation from all over the country (Cappelli 2020; El Colegio de la Frontera Norte 2018; HCH Televisión Digital 2018). As the group moved upwards, the caravan's attention in international media outlets boosted the membership of Guatemalans, Salvadorans, and Nicaraguans.

Second, different leaders emerged within the caravan who guided the groups towards Mexico and the US (El Colegio de la Frontera Norte 2019; Gandini, Fernández de la Reguera, and Narváez Gutiérrez 2020). When the caravan started, the participants chose 14 coordinators --by municipality-- (Pradilla 2019, 166), but as the group grew, some leaders emerged, and others faded away. With 7,000 participants, the organisation was complex, and the consensus was not always achieved; however, they agreed on one thing: to move forward (Pradilla 2019).

Human Rights Commissioners, activists, religious organisations, and NGOs assisted the caravan (Castro Neira 2019; Garibo García and Call 2020; Pradilla 2019). The NGO *Pueblo Sin Fronteras* (PSF) had a relevant role in providing information about the caravan route, elaborating press releases --in Spanish and English--and facilitating *asambleas* where leaders and participants made decisions about the caravan (El Colegio de la Frontera Norte 2019). According to Garibo García and Call (2020, 77), members' participation in the assemblies fluctuated between 5 and 25 percent. During the assemblies, a group of facilitators composed of Central American and Mexican migrants used a megaphone to propose topics for discussion --such as the routes they would follow and the responses to different proposals made by the Federal government. For instance, when Mexican President Enrique Peña Nieto offered caravan members the possibility to stay in Mexico through the adherence to the programme '*Estás en tu Casa*', migrants assessed the offer in an assembly, voted to refuse it, and continued their walk (Martín Pérez 2018). Then, they made a public statement on a Facebook group called *Caravana de Migrantes Hondureños*, in English and Spanish, refusing the offer and claiming for a safe passage to the US-Mexico border. In the group, they also shared information about the routes they were following, police and immigration officers' presence in the routes, and calls for food, shelter, clothes, and other supplies.

Third, the arrival in Tapachula, Mexico, signalled a structured movement (El Colegio de la Frontera Norte 2018). At the Mexico- Guatemala international bridge, caravan members used a strategy whereby women and children were located at the beginning of the caravan to enter Mexican soil (Martínez 2018b). PSF personnel, who wore green fluorescent vests to be recognised amongst the thousands of people, led the move forward to Tapachula (40 km). Activists and migrants held banners, flags from the different participating countries and chanted slogans and mottos (El Colegio de la Frontera Norte 2019).

Fourth, once on Mexican soil, caravan members organised themselves to get resources. For instance, some members asked for rides for other group members. To avoid being kidnapped, members decided to take photos of the vehicles' plates in which they travelled and agreed to meet again in a given place to continue their journey (Garibo García and Call 2020). They also set up a 'security system' whereby more than 300 people took turns to surveil the mobile camps migrants set up on their way (Pradilla 2019).

While there were some organisation and planning, decisions were taken on the spot and in the spur of the moment. The actions were organic and responded to how events unfolded, underscoring the changing character of this ‘movement on the move’. As Pradilla (2019, 166) notes, ‘the caravan is a living being because it mutates, it emends, and it contradicts itself’.

La Caminata del Migrante as a movement existing with some temporal continuity

To bring about change, some sort of organised, sustained activity is necessary. The caravan meant a shift in the way migrants self-organise, create subjective practices and spaces, and bring about change. After the first caravan left Honduras on October 13, 2018, more people started to organise subsequent caravans. For instance, in late October and November 2018, more caravans were formed in El Salvador and Honduras. Although there are discrepancies about how many caravans formed in Central America in the fall of 2018, some sources claimed that there were at least four caravans (Arista 2019; El Colegio de la Frontera Norte 2019). By December 2018, it is said that more than 6,000 people had arrived at the Mexico-US border, being a group of 85 people of the LGBTI community the first to arrive in Tijuana (El Colegio de la Frontera Norte 2019).

The caravans continued to bring thousands of people together throughout 2019, 2020, and 2021. In January 2019, more than 13,000 people arrived in Mexico. In January 2020, a large caravan composed of at least 3,000 people formed in Honduras. In October 2020, a new caravan formed to leave Honduras after the government’s restrictive measures amid the COVID-19 outbreak (BBC News Mundo 2020). In January and March 2021, more groups left Honduras seeking to arrive in the US as the hurricanes Eta and Iota exacerbated their precarious living situation. Though the number of people participating in the caravans has fluctuated, the caravans have continued as a collective action to raise migrants’ voices against a regime that has rendered them illegal and has pushed them into precarity and irregularity.

Based on the analysis of these axes, I argue *La Caminata del Migrante* is a social movement on the move composed of collectives of migrants from different nationalities, genders, and sexual orientations moving together with some degree of planning and organization aiming to challenge a system of authority at the local and international level, using innovative repertoires of contention.

Transnational social movement on the move

La Caminata del Migrante can be deemed as a transnational social movement (TSM), though it presents variations to the commonly referred TSMs. TSMs are commonly conceived as movements operating in two countries (Almeida and Chase-Dunn 2018). Through a process of diffusion, a movement transfers its claims or forms of contention from one site to another (Tarrow 2005). Sydney Tarrow (2005) stressed the need to study transnational movements, as much of the social movement scholarship had a static framing of its main variables –opportunities, resources, framing, and repertoire of contention– and an overwhelming focus on studying local, domestic movements. In response, he sought to fill the gap with the study of transnational movements while

considering their processes of diffusion and scale shift – ‘the coordination of the collective action at a different level from where it began’ (Tarrow 2005, 32). Since then, many transnational movements have arisen, such as the Black Lives Matter (Tillery 2019), the Women’s Marches, and the Occupy movement.

The caravan, however, constitutes a different TSM. I refer to this as a ‘*transnational social movement on the move*’ as it is a social movement that takes place in different countries; its repertoire of contention occurs in international spaces; the movement diffuses across countries and scales up while it moves. It is its mobile character that makes it different from other TSMs.

The caravan had a scale shift in the scope of protest. It started as a Honduran-based social movement, becoming a fully-fleshed-out transnational movement as it crossed borders. It brought together new kinds of actors and a change in the level of coordinated contentious actions. In other words, actors elevated their protests from the local to the transnational level.

Further, TSMs usually occur in two or more countries simultaneously, but the demonstrations occur within the nations’ public space. For instance, the Women’s March took place in several countries worldwide, but the demonstrations are circumscribed to the nation-space. The caravan breaks with this model since the demonstrations occur in transnational spaces and ‘on the move’.

In terms of what is diffused, research shows behaviours and ideas, along with organisational forms and structures, are transferred (Soule and Roggeband 2019). In the caravan, behavioural diffusion relates to the spread of tactics that participants used in subsequent caravans. The ideational diffusion also occurred as the collective action frames used in the first caravan were also used as a starting point to adhere participants and mobilise new caravans.

Information and Communications Technology (ICTs) enable nonrelational diffusion (Soule and Roggeband 2019). News media (radio, newspapers, television) and social media (Facebook, WhatsApp, Twitter) are central to exchanging ideas and spread of protests. The caravan featured prominent social media use by organisers and members to spread information, gain members, and coordinate action while benefiting from news media that reported on the caravan. Also, media outlets depicted migrants as ungrateful, creating racist and xenophobic sentiments (Pérez Díaz and Aguilar Pérez 2021). More importantly, the movement diffused and gained members while it crossed borders. Thus, this movement calls for a rethinking of social movements in terms of jurisdiction, actors, networks, time, and space.

Finally, the conceptualisation of ‘TSM on the move’ contributes to the literature on social movements and diffusion (Snow et al. 2019b; Soule and Roggeband 2019), mainly to spaces and repertoires of contention, jurisdiction, and mechanisms of diffusion. Social movements literature has yet to fully grasp the novelty of this movement given that it has focused on studying ‘migrant struggles’ originating in the country of destination of migrants, mainly in Europe and the US (Beltrán 2009; Dikeç 2013; Escudero and Pallares 2020). However, scholars have not yet thoroughly investigated migrant-led transnational movements that originate in the Global South, in the country of origin of migrants, and ‘on the move’. Moreover, the concept of ‘TSM on the move’ provides a framework to analyse movements that may arise in other parts of the world and an analytical tool to reinterpret past movements with similar characteristics.

Conclusion

This article contributes to social movement literature in three ways: (1) by showing how a particular form of migration – caravans – can be analysed through the lens of Social Movements literature, and how it fits the definition of a social movement; and (2) by adding elements to the repertoire and spaces of contention; and (c) by proposing a new type of social movement, transnational social movement on the move. The case contributes to migration studies by studying how migrants organise themselves to (a) migrate collectively and (b) to collectively contest a system of authority at the local and international levels.

Since the 1990s, migrants have travelled in secrecy, looking to appear invisible vis-à-vis a system that has them irregular. Migrants travelled at night, at dawn, in the back of trucks, or guided through the desert and the river by coyotes. They have travelled clandestinely in small groups or individually, looking to arrive in the US. However, the groups of migrants that left Central America in October 2018 have broken with such clandestine migration by coming out of the shadows, gathering in public places, claiming their rights and space, developing a political subjectivity, and doing the unexpected. By marching together during the day, crossing international borders, contesting police and immigration officers at and beyond the border, chanting and holding banners, migrants brought to light the effects of selective and restrictive immigration policies that has rendered them illegal and has pushed them into irregularity (De Genova 2002). Those who were denied their rights are no the mere victims of a system but rather political actors that demand policy action and attention. With their voices and presence, they have put their grievances and claims at the centre of public opinion and have changed the narrative about their injustices.

The case study led us to conclude that the caravan was a form of protest and resistance (Salazar Araya 2019). It was a social movement that gathered thousands of noncitizens as purposive actors; it was planned and organised; it grew out in contrast with a system of authority, aimed at some sort of transformation, and had some temporal continuity. Moreover, the caravan was a ‘transnational social movement on the move’ that differed from other TSM, as it took place in different countries while it was moving; its repertoire of contention occurred at international spaces; the movement diffused as people advanced with the caravan, and it shifted its scope from national to international. It was its mobile character that distinguished it from other TSMs.

This case study offers an alternative framework to study migration. While the AoM approach helps analyse migrants’ political subjectivities and contestation at and beyond the border, social movements literature provides the possibility to examine other elements of the caravan.

Finally, this paper also raises questions for future research, including What happened to migrants once they reached the US southern border? How important is ‘success’ of some sort for a movement to qualify as a social movement? How can we ‘measure the success’ of a migrant-led social movement? Was reaching the border enough of a result, regardless of what happened to the migrants once they reached the southern US border? What happened in the process of contention and containment that followed the October 2018 caravans? I strongly encourage scholars to pursue these pressing and important questions.

Notes

1. See Enhancement Plan for the Southern Border (Frelick 1991); Southern Plan (París Pombo 2017); Southern Border Program (Animal Político 2014); Iniciativa Mérida (Vogt 2020).
2. Operation Hold the Line (Frelick 1991); Operation Gatekeeper and Operation Safeguard; and Operation Rio Grande Valley (Guerette and Clarke 2005).

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ORCID

Rosario de la Luz Rizzo Lara  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-7554-8420>

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