

## Reconsidering the human smuggler (coyote). A center-periphery vision

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### Abstract

Nearly 2.5 million irregular migrants hired a human smuggler in 2016 with a profit of US\$ 5.5-7 billion. Smugglers not only transport people illegally but also are frequently associated with other illegal activities, which has concerned international organizations as well as nation-states for decades. Despite human smuggling being an illegal activity, some scholars, based on the notion of social capital, argue that it may be a legitimate (Sanchez 2017; Spener 2009) and even developmental strategy (Spener 2009). Studying the northeast border of Mexico, Spener describes a “Clandestine-Crossing” smuggler, who comes from the community of the migrant, does not search for financial advantage, and mostly engages in exchanges of social capital. In this article, we examine if a type of social coyote is identifiable using the Mexican survey Encuestas sobre Migración en la Frontera Norte; if in Mexico the distribution of social capital in hiring a coyote is similar by sex and region; and if a center-periphery analysis contributes to better explaining the irregular migration on the Mexican north border than social capital theory. Our conclusions are that we can identify a Clandestine-Crossing coyote, but such a coyote charges a high price, there are regional differences in the use of social capital, the coyote-migrant relationship is not a developmental policy, and it is possible to better understand, and solve, the problem of irregular migration using center-periphery analysis.

*Keywords:* social capital, center-periphery, coyote, EMIF Norte.

*JEL classification:* F22, F63.

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## **Reconsiderando al traficante de personas (coyote). Una visión centro-periferia**

### **Resumen**

2.5 millones de inmigrantes irregulares contrataron a un traficante de personas (coyotes) en 2016 con una rentabilidad de entre 5 500 y 7 000 millones de dólares. Los coyotes no sólo transportan personas ilegalmente, sino que también con frecuencia son relacionados con otras actividades ilegales, lo que preocupa a las organizaciones internacionales y a los Estados nacionales desde años atrás. A pesar de que el tráfico de personas es una actividad ilegal, algunos académicos, basándose en la noción de capital social, sostienen que puede ser una estrategia legítima (Sánchez 2017; Spener 2009) e incluso fomentar el desarrollo (Spener 2009). Al estudiar la frontera noreste de México, Spener describe a un tipo de coyote llamado “cruce- clandestino”, el cual se caracteriza por provenir de la comunidad de los migrantes, no buscar ventajas financieras y surgir principalmente de los intercambios de capital social. En este artículo, examinamos si un tipo de coyote social es identificable utilizando la encuesta Encuestas sobre Migración en la Frontera Norte; si en México la distribución del capital social en la contratación de un coyote es similar por sexo y región; y si un análisis centro-periferia contribuye a explicar mejor la migración irregular en la frontera norte de México que la teoría del capital social. Nuestras conclusiones son que podemos identificar un coyote de cruce clandestino, pero ese coyote cobra un precio alto por sus servicios, que existen diferencias regionales en el uso del capital social, que la relación coyote-migrante no es una política de desarrollo y, que es posible comprender mejor y resolver el problema de la migración irregular mediante el análisis centro-periferia.

*Palabras clave:* Capital social, centro-periferia, coyote, EMIF Norte.

*Clasificación JEL:* F22, F63.

Reconsidering human smuggler (coyote). A center-periphery vision<sup>1</sup>**1. Introduction**

A human smuggler carries unauthorized humans as a commodity from one country to another, usually for a fee. Does this activity have a positive impact for a group of people or a country? On many occasions, these smugglers not only make a profit on illegally transporting human beings but also are associated with other illegal activities. Worldwide, 2.5 million people were smuggled with a profit of US\$ 5.5-7 billion in 2016. The business of smuggling people from Central America transiting through Mexico with the intention of entering the United States was worth nearly US\$ 2 billion in 2014, and the whole route to North America from the southern border was worth of US\$ 3.7-4.2 billion in the years 2014 and 2015 (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime 2018). These data indicate that the North American route is the most important in the world.

A human smuggler has many names, but in Mexico they are known as coyotes.<sup>2</sup> A coyote has multiple facets, and for this reason is difficult to study. The United Nations (UN) (2000), in its Protocol Against the Smuggling of Migrants by Land, Sea, and Air, Supplementing the United Nations Convention Against Transnational Organized Crime, has established what human smuggling is, and the duties of the states to punish it. By May 2019, 112 countries had signed this protocol (Campana 2020), and countries in North America such as Mexico and the United States have established measures to prevent irregular migration.

Interestingly, some organizations and researchers have suggested a positive role for the coyote in society. For the United Nations (2000), transporting people is legal and legitimate if the migrants are refugees and the smuggler does not ask for any fee. Unlike the United Nations, Hidalgo (2016, 311) comments that smuggling is morally justified even if the coyote gains a financial advantage. Like Hidalgo, for Sanchez (2017), coyotes help migrants and asylum seekers achieve their objective in a relationship of trust, tradition, and reciprocity (Sanchez 2017, 10). Finally, Spener (1999, 2001, 2004, 2008, 2009), studying the northeast of Mexico, proposes a context in which the interaction of migrant-coyote-states makes the coyote legitimate. First, irregular migration is caused by the nation-state's prohibition

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<sup>1</sup> We would like to thank Christine Pickett, and Zebo Idrisova for comments and corrections to a previous draft of this paper. All mistakes are the authors responsibility.

<sup>2</sup> In northeast Mexico, "Patero" is also used for coyote, and in northwest Mexico "Pollero" is extensively used instead of coyote. In other countries, smugglers have other names.

of free movement of people; rich nation-states such as the United States prevent immigration based on race and nationality.<sup>3</sup> Second, escaping from their countries, Mexican migrants, based on the recommendations of relatives or friends, look for coyotes who may have in the past been migrants themselves. Third, a strong migrant-coyote relationship is possible due to funds of social capital, networks of persons or groups where people can exchange intangible and tangible resources among them. In the Mexican case, funds of resources have been created between Mexicans on the two sides of the border due to a one-hundred-year history of Mexican emigration (see Spener 2009; Massey, Durand, and Pren 2016; Sanchez 2017; Durand 2016).

Recognizing the interaction among coyotes and other actors, Spener (2009, 95, italics in the original) asserts the term coyote can be misleading, and it is better to use 'coyotaje' which expresses: "...the set of border-crossing strategies, and practices elaborated by coyotes at the behest of and in concert with migrants, migrants' friends, and family members, and/or migrants' U.S. employers." He distinguishes three types of coyotaje operating in the Mexican northeast border: Labor-Brokerage (migrant-recruiter- contractor), Bureaucratic-Evasion (overcoming legal-bureaucratic obstacles imposed by the states), and Clandestine-Crossing (guiding migrants to the border to their destination).<sup>4</sup> According to Spener, Labor-Brokerage first appeared more than one hundred years ago, and today the most important at the Mexican northeast border are Bureaucratic-Evasion and Clandestine-Crossing (Spener 2009). Izcarra Palacios (2022) challenges this assertion and points out that Clandestine-Crossing is rather unimportant, and much more important is Labor-Brokerage today. Further evidence against the relevance of Clandestine-Crossing is, according to Roberts et al. (2010) and that Andreas (2011), that the high price charged by coyotes indicates the lack of a competitive market and thus the dominion of transnational smuggling networks, and Andreas (2011) points out that sophisticated transnational smuggling networks are the most important type of coyotaje today.

Clandestine-Crossing is associated with a migratory autonomous alternative provoked by the state's migratory policies based on race and nationality. These policies, in Spener's (2009) view, make the world extremely unequal, inhibiting people's opportunities for a better life. In this type of coyotaje, a

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<sup>3</sup> Even this is done in opposition to UN human rights (United Nations, 1948).

<sup>4</sup> The social acceptance of the coyote is widely extended as part of the shadow economy between legal/illegal activities, and the coyote is part of the so-called popular culture in Latin America, particularly in Mexico.

migrant looks for coyotes, and these coyotes are known by the migrant's family or friends. Some migrants become coyotes themselves, and smuggling may not be for profit but to aid migrants (Zhang 2007; Spener 2009; Sanchez 2017). We test in this article: (1) if a type of coyote Clandestine-Crossing is identifiable using the Mexican survey Encuesta sobre Migración en la Frontera Norte (flow of returned people from US authorities and shortened to EMIF Norte); (2) if in Mexico the distribution of social capital in hiring a coyote is similar by sex and region; and (3) if a center-periphery analysis contributes to better explaining the irregular migration on the Mexican north border than social capital theory, and if this analysis can lead to a solution for irregular migration.

After this introduction this article proceeds as follows: First, we estimate migrants' likelihood of hiring a coyote and the cost for these migrants who have relatives or friends in the United States; our expected assumption is that fees paid to a coyote from people who have relatives and friends in the United States should be cheaper than fees from people who have no relatives or friends. Second, given people who hire a coyote paying a fee, we quantify the likelihood of having relatives and friends in the United States by sex of the migrant and Mexican region of origin, where we are looking for differences in the distribution of social capital by sex and region (see Ochoa O'Leary 2012). Third, we review if institutional analysis and a center-periphery analysis rooted in the world system and the school of unequal and combined development is a better approach to explaining inequality between countries and subsequent irregular migration.

In the next section, we review the literature concerning coyotes and describe the methodology for processing the Mexican survey of the EMIF Norte. Subsequently, we test whether a Clandestine-Crossing type of coyote is identifiable using the EMIF Norte and if there exist sex and regional differences. Then, we frame coyotes and irregular migration in an institutional and center-periphery analysis. Our conclusions are that we can identify a Clandestine-Crossing coyote by the EMIF Norte but such a coyote charges a high price, there are regional differences in the use of social capital, coyote-migrant relationship is not a developmental policy, and it is possible to better understand, and solve the problem of, irregular migration using center-periphery analysis.

## 2. Literature review and methodology

Currently, human smuggling is an illegal activity, and it is often related to other crimes such as labor and sexual exploitation, fraud, torture, extortion, kidnapping, narcotics, violence, and in some cases financing terrorist activities. Without accurate and updated numbers due to the nature of the subject, it is a profitable business, with a profit of US\$ 5.5-7 billion in 2016 worldwide (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime 2018). The most important routes by the magnitude of the migrants and the profits were from West Africa to North Africa with a flow of 380,000 immigrants in 2016 and a profit ranging from US\$ 760 to 1014 million; the Mediterranean route with a flow of migrants of about 375,000 in 2016 and profits ranging from US\$320 to 550 million; and by far, the most important route of North America, with a flow of immigrants around 735 to 820,000 per year in 2014 and 2015 and an estimated profit of US\$ 3.7-4.2 billion per year (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime 2018). On this route, migrants coming from Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador had an 68.2 percent likelihood of hiring a coyote in 2019, with the cost for a coyote transiting throughout Mexico and crossing the US border near to US\$ 11 thousand in 2019 (see Isidro Luna and Lopez Vega 2023). Similarly, migrants coming from Mexico to the United States in 2019 had a 52 percent likelihood of hiring a coyote with a cost of around US\$ 5, 000 (Rivera Vazquez et al. 2023). Therefore, human smuggling is a profitable business with high fees on the Mexican northern border.

World organizations such as the United Nations and several countries have attempted to combat human smugglers. For the United Nations, nation-states must prevent and combat human smuggling. According to the United Nations (2000, 2) ““Smuggling of migrants” shall mean the procurement, in order to obtain, directly or indirectly, a financial or other material benefit, of the illegal entry of a person into a State Party of which the person is not a national or a permanent resident.” Countries with more than hundred years of history of emigration to the United States, and in the last thirty years an intensified history of immigration and transit migration from Central America, such as Mexico, have underwritten sanctions against human smuggling in the Law on Population, the Federal Law Against Organized Crime, and the General Law on Migration (Organización Internacional para las Migraciones 2021). Mexico imprisons and fines people smuggling Mexicans into other countries, and imposes the same measures on people who facilitate irregular migration into Mexico from other countries (Organization

International para las Migraciones 2021, 5). The United States, as one of the most powerful countries in the world, tried to control the pace of regular and irregular migration into the country during the twentieth century, and increased border enforcement beginning in the 1990s (Massey, Durand, and Pren 2016; Castles 2004; Roberts et al., 2010). Pierri (1979) states that, at the beginning of the twentieth century, the United States followed a unilateral migration policy. Durand (1994) confirms this idea and notes that the United States has fomented legal transfers of labor from Mexico such as in the 1948-1954 period (mostly during the Korean war), but it has also implemented massive programs of undocumented Mexican migrants' deportation such as in the years of 1923, 1929, 1939, and the paramount year of 1954 with the wetback operation. However, in Duran's opinion, US migratory policy has backfired, and restrictions to legal migration have just opened the door to illegal immigration. This increasing irregular migration occurred in the 1942-1964 with the Bracero program, and from the 1990s onward when the US government increased hours of surveillance and introduced new technologies on the Mexican north border (Corona and Tuirán 2001; Roberts et al. 2010). A more recent episode of unilateral migration policy has been the migration protection protocols started in 2019 that mandate some asylum seekers in the United States complete their process in Mexico. However, with the US policy, migration policies are intended to prevent not only illegal immigration but also other crimes such as terrorism (see Sheldon 2007, Ochoa O'Leary 2012). The US policy claims human smugglers can facilitate entrance to terrorist groups. A congressional House Hearing (2005, 2) reported, "Remember, for example, the Lebanese Mexican human smuggler Bougadar, who brought in over 300 Hezbollah sympathizers by way of false visas in Tijuana in the last few years."

Conversely, international organizations and researchers may perceive coyotes as having a positive impact in society. First, for Torre Cantalapiedra (2018), because states and mass media are combating coyotes, they offer a mostly negative opinion of them, with little evidence. Second, for the United Nations, smuggling people is legal and legitimate if the migrants are refugees, and the smuggler is not taking any financial advantage. This distinction is important, and we identify in our dataset the coyotes who do not accrue any financial advantage. Third, researchers suggest that, in a competitive market, coyotes may offer a service, and the fee may be a just payment for both sides in a voluntary transaction. Over time, a migrant-coyote relationship may arise based on trust and cooperation. Along this

line of thought, Hidalgo (2016, 311) comments that smuggling is morally justified when people “are fleeing wars and political collapse.” Even if these migrants pay a fee, Hidalgo sees it as a transaction where the two parties have consent, make a profit, and do not violate any third-party right. Also, Slack and Martinez (2018) note that if a coyote provides good service and treats the migrants properly, the migrants may recommend the coyote, and both parties may establish ties of trustworthiness and reciprocity. In this situation, high coyote fees are not driven by the financial motives of the coyote but rather are due to border enforcement and few crossing points (Sanchez and Seldon 2018). Following this line of thought, Latham-Sprinkle *et al.* (2019, 32), notes that “irregular migration networks and people smuggling are not always or inherently exploitative... studies suggest that migrant smuggling networks are organized as networks of trust in which migrants frequently are grateful to smugglers.” Finally, Spener (1999, 2001, 2004, 2008, 2009), studying the northeast Mexican border, proposes coyotes as an expression of Third World people’s resistance. Because rich countries do not permit free entrance of people, inhabitants in poor countries look for autonomous ways of entrance to the United States. The migrants-coyote relationship is a strike against the unilateral states’ policies on immigration, and a strong migrant-coyote relationship is possible due to community and family networks, confidence, and shared beliefs on how to reduce risks for migrating (choosing the most rational alternative), and in summary in the so-called funds of social capital where people are able to exchange intangible and tangible resources (Poder, 2011). In the Mexican case, resources have been created between Mexicans on the two sides of the border due to a one-hundred-year history of Mexican emigration (see 1999, 2001, 2004, 2008, 2009; Massey, Duran, and Pren 2016; Sanchez 2017). Massey, Durand, and Pren (2016, 1564) describe social capital as follows:

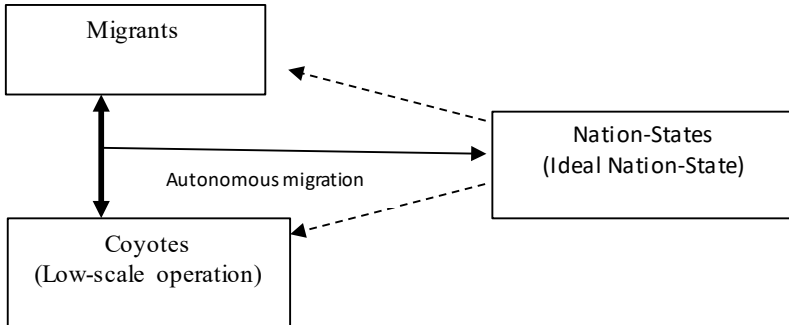
Social Capital theory, meanwhile, holds that within any migration system networks develop and extend over time to provide a social infrastructure capable of supporting and sustaining international migration in the face of obstacles and barriers... Through network connections, migrants gain access to information and assistance for unauthorized border crossing. Aspiring migrants arrive at the border and through their social networks locate the border smuggler, or coyote, who is then contracted to the way across the frontier for a price, with higher prices generally increasing the odds of a successful entry.

May there be a type of coyote who has been emerged through the one-hundred-year emigration between Mexico and the United States, one who is mostly recommended by relatives and friends, who offers a low fee and has a good reputation, and, where the migrant and coyote meet voluntarily? Does coyote “Clandestine-Crossing” come from the exchange of tangible and intangible resources between Mexicans located on the two sides of the border? Of Spener’s (1999, 2001, 2004, 2008, 2009) three types of migrant-coyote in relationship in the northeast Mexican border-Labor-Brokerage (migrant-recruiter-contractor), Bureaucratic-Evasion (overcoming legal-bureaucratic obstacles imposed by the states), and Clandestine-Crossing (guiding migrants to the border to their final destination) -he advances Bureaucratic-Evasion and Clandestine-Crossing as the most important today. Labor-Brokerage is a relationship among the migrant-coyote-contractor, which is determined by the US demand of labor, and where the contractor pays the coyote for workers. This is the kind of coyote that Gamio (1930; see also Durand 2016) described in the 1920s between the cities of El Paso and Ciudad Juárez. Bureaucratic-Evasion includes not only the counterfeiting of documents but also “travel agents, lawyers, bankers, labor recruiters, brokers, interpreters, and housing agents” (Castles 2004, 859). Bureaucratic-Evasion may include legal as well as illegal migration, and it may be strengthened owing to social networks (Castles 2004). For Spener, this type of coyotaje arose together with the Bracero Program, and after 1986 was one of the most important types of coyotaje up until today. Like Bureaucratic-Evasion, Clandestine-Crossing developed out social networks, and historically Clandestine-Crossing absorbed coyotaje Labor-Brokerage when migrants became coyotes and contractors themselves, and thus, migrant and coyote had fewer problems of asymmetry information.

With Spener’s coyotaje approach, (1) relatives and friends recommend the coyote to the migrant, and migrants could become coyotes themselves. Both sides sustain attachments to the same community (Spener 2004, 2009; Sanchez 2017). (2) The coyote’s work is not to profit but rather to maintain funds of social capital (Spener 2004, 2009; Zhang 2007). (3) With this kind of coyotaje, the migrant-coyote relationship is a resistance to the migratory policies of the nation-states (Spener 2009). In diagram 1, the thick bidirectional indicates that migrants and coyotes may have a consensual and strong relationship. If a coyote forced a migrant, it could be seen as human trafficking (Campana 2020), or if the coyote took advantage of the migrant, it could be a service with a bad reputation (Spener 2009). Instead,

the migrant-coyote main rival is the nation-state, the ideal nation-state as in Heyman and Smart (1999) (indicated with the black arrow).<sup>5</sup> Migrants and coyotes carry out an autonomous migration, and ideally nation-states combat coyotes and try to protect migrants because they have the monopoly on migratory policies (black dashed arrows).

Diagram 1  
Clandestine-Crossing



Source: own elaboration

Researchers have challenged the relevance of Clandestine-Crossing. Izcara Palacios (2022), interviewing around two hundred coyotes mostly from Tamaulipas, asserts that Clandestine-Crossing is rather unimportant, and much more important today is Labor-Brokerage. Robert et al. (2010) and Andreas (2011) note that high price in the coyote business indicates no competitive market, and thus coyotes do not have a low-scale operation nor a free-entrance business, but rather a monopolized business with high prices. Ochoa O’Leary (2011) questions if the intangible knowledge of a coyote is not a factor driving financial advantage and also that social capital may distributed unequally. In the following section, we estimate if a type of coyotaje, Clandestine-Crossing, is identifiable based on the Mexican survey of migration EMIF Norte, in the flow of returned migrants from the US authorities to Mexico in the 2013-2019 period.<sup>6</sup> Our target is the Mexican population that

<sup>5</sup> Heyman and Smart (1999) comment that there is gap between the ideal state (as a representative of the ethics) and the empirical state.

<sup>6</sup> Unfortunately, the question of the survey if the returned migrant from US authorities is not any more in the 2020 and 2022 questionnaire.

was returned by US authorities and that is resident in Mexico. This population is distinguished by year of crossing to the United States by subtracting the date of apprehension minus the time migrants remained in the United States. Then, if migrants hire a coyote and pay a fee, we estimate whether these migrants have relatives or friends in the United States and the cost involved in hiring a coyote. We also identify the place where the migrant contacts the smuggler. Next, given the population that hires a coyote, we compute the likelihood of the migrants having relatives and friends in the United States by sex and Mexican region of origin. In the case of the region, we use the migratory region of origin as in Massey and Douglass (2003), and it must be recalled that the data in the survey is not person-based but event-based.<sup>7</sup>

### 3. Testing clandestine-crossing and the distribution of social capital

In Clandestine-Crossing, migrants and coyotes must, ideally, have a relationship of trust forged in the long history of Mexican emigration to the United States. Furthermore, the coyote must not have a history of violence and must be small-scale and embedded in the migrant community. Some migrants may have been coyotes themselves. Spener (2004) and the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime describe this type of coyote:

In particular, current US border control policies and the century-long tradition of Mexican migration to the US have created social structures that might be expected to push both migrants and their smugglers toward relationships that include enforceable trust. (Spener 2004, 314)

Throughout the continent [Americas], most smugglers operate on a small scale within their communities and abroad mainly by mobilizing personal connections. The vast majority has no criminal background... Most smugglers involved in complex operations are either known to each other by virtue of kinship or friendship or have entered into ad hoc partnerships with larger and better resourced groups. Some are migrants or refugees themselves who have become involved in some aspect of smuggling either in the context of their own journey or because they reside along the migrant route. (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime 2018, 83 and 98).

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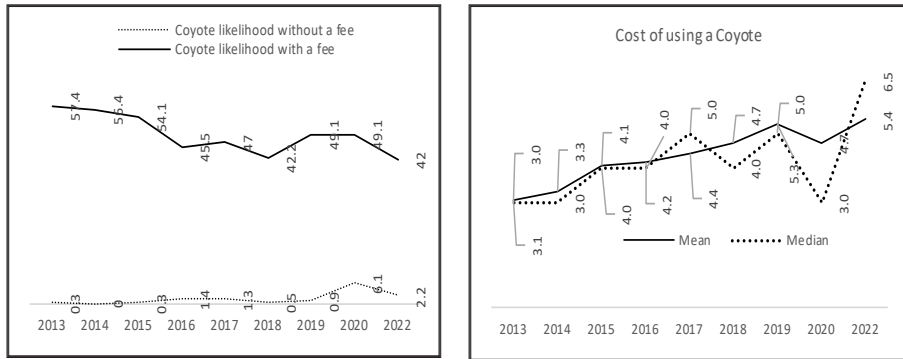
<sup>7</sup> Number of events of our population of study are in the Appendix.

In this section, we estimate the likelihood of migrants who hire a coyote paying a fee, and for this population of migrants we calculate the cost involved in hiring a coyote and whether these migrants have relatives and friends in the United States. Our expectation is that these migrants who hire a coyote and pay a fee must have a higher likelihood of having relatives and friends in the United States, and the coyote cost must be cheaper than for migrants who hire a coyote without having relatives and friends in the United States. Subsequently, we quantify the likelihood of migrants with friends and relatives in the United States hiring a coyote and the cost involved in hiring this coyote by sex and region.

Before presenting the data for having relatives and friends in the United States influencing the decision to hire a coyote, we distinguish in the dataset the migrants who hire a coyote paying a fee and without paying a fee. The likelihood of hiring a coyote paying a fee has been stable from 2016 onward with an average of 45.8 percent. On the left side of figure 1, the likelihood of hiring a coyote decreased from 2015 to 2016, and then stabilized. The survey was not carried out in 2021 due to the pandemic, and in 2020 only three quarters were available and in 2022 just two quarters. Despite these disadvantages, it is easy to see that people who declare hiring a coyote without paying any fee is extremely low, and without statistical significance. The right side of figure 1 shows the increasing tendency of the mean and median of the cost of a coyote. The weighted mean almost doubles from 3,000 dollars to 5,400 dollars, and the median behaves in the same way. This tendency agrees with the results of other studies of coyotes (Rivera Vazquez et al. 2023), and the monetary amount in current dollars indicates the social wealth that the coyote can accrue from the migrants.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> From here on we present just the weighted mean in the subsequent plots (as mean and median behave in the same way). We compute the weighted mean with the 95 interval.



Source: own Estimations Based on CONAPO et al. (2013-2022)

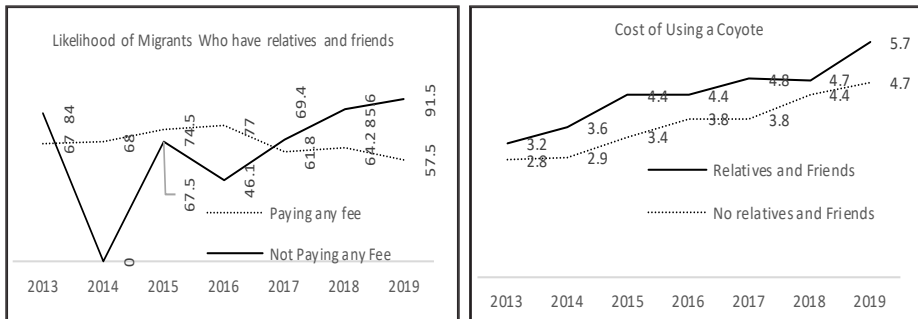
Note: the number of observations for coyote probability without a fee was 5 in 2013, 1 in 2014, 6 in 2015, 57 in 2016, 24 in 2017, 13 in 2018, 17 in 2019, 24 in 2020, and 12 in 2022.

Figure 1  
Likelihood of using a coyote and Its cost  
(mean and median, US thousand dollars)

Migrants who hire a coyote paying a fee have a high likelihood of having relatives and friend in the United States. From 67 percent in 2013, this likelihood peaked at 77 percent in 2016 and after it decreased until reaching 57.5 percent in 2019. The cost of using a coyote for people who have relatives or friends in the United States is higher than for those who do not (and higher for the whole population presented in figure 1). In the 2013-2019 period, the average cost difference in hiring a coyote between the two groups of migrants who have relatives and friends in the United States and who do not was 700 dollars. In some years, as in 2015, 2017, and 2019, the difference reached one thousand dollars. A coyote obtained through a network is more expensive than a coyote migrants hire who do not have relatives and friends in the United States. This finding is in line with the explanation that border enforcement increases coyotes' fees; however, it does not explain why migrants who do not have friends and relatives in the United States pay a lower fee. As Massey, Durand, and Pren (2016) have hypothesized, the high price of coyotes may be an issue of quality, but then if this were true, the free entry and the small-scale business would no longer be sustained.

Some of the migrants who hire a coyote and have relatives and friends in the United States contact the smuggler in their hometown. As evidence of this local contact, the US CRS (2021, 1) states, "Often, smugglers have local ties that they leverage in order to gain customers." This contact in their

hometown can serve a low bound of evidence of Clandestine-Crossing coyotaje, since we are supposing that the coyote is rooted in the migrant community.<sup>9</sup> Migrants who have relatives and friends in the United States made the contact in their hometown an average of 33 percent of the time in 2013-2019, peaking at 43.7 percent in 2018 (see table 1). The type of coyote hired by migrants who have relatives or friends in the United States, and with whom the migrants make contact in their hometown, must be Clandestine-Crossing coyotaje. However, overall, this type of coyote charges a higher price.



Source: own Estimations Based on CONAPO et al. (2013-2019)

Note: the number of observations for coyote probability without a fee was 5 in 2013, 1 in 2014, 6 in 2015, 57 in 2016, 24 in 2017, 13 in 2018, 17 in 2019, 24 in 2020, and 12 in 2022.

Figure 2

The likelihood of migrants who hire a coyote having relatives and friends in the united states (left side), and the cost of the coyote for those who pay a fee and have and do not have relatives and friends in the united states (US\$ thousands of dollars)

<sup>9</sup> Since we also know that migrants who have relatives and friends in the United can make contact in the city they cross at the border.

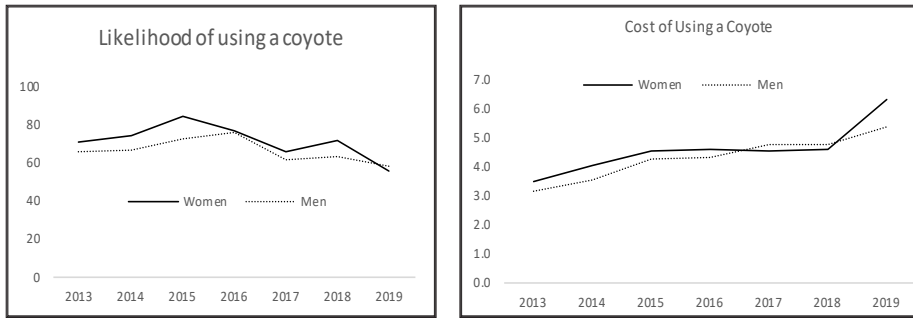
Table 1  
Place of hiring the coyote (percentage)

Year	Crossing City at the Border	United States	Hometown	On the Road	Other
2013	57.1	3.3	21.8	17.2	0.5
2014	60.2	4.3	24.1	10.6	0.8
2015	47.6	4.2	34.6	12.9	0.6
2016	46.5	5.3	41.1	6.8	0.4
2017	52.6	5.5	34.8	7.1	0.9
2018	39.7	7.1	43.7	7.9	1.6
2019	59.3	1.8	32.5	5.2	1.1

Source: own estimations based on CONAPO et al. (2013-2019).

Note: no available is omitted.

Social capital as exchanges of tangible and intangible resources can favor people or regions. Ochoa O' Leary (2012) states that social capital theory can have some drawbacks as a developmental strategy. One of these pitfalls is that access to tangible or intangible resources is distributed unequally among people in disadvantaged groups, such as women. In our analysis, we consider not only an analysis by sex but also by region. In the regional analysis disparities, advantages can be found for regions that started their migratory process earlier. First, of the population of women who hire a coyote and pay a fee, the likelihood of having relatives and friends in the United States is not different for men and women. Despite women being in a disadvantaged population, the likelihood of having relatives and friends for women who hire a coyote has decreased from 83.9 percent in 2015 to 55.9 percent in 2019, with the 2019 likelihood for males at 58.3 percent. Also, there are no regularities in the cost of a coyote by gender, and women and men seem to pay the same amount. Furthermore, in some years, women have paid less than men (see figure 3).



Note: no available is omitted

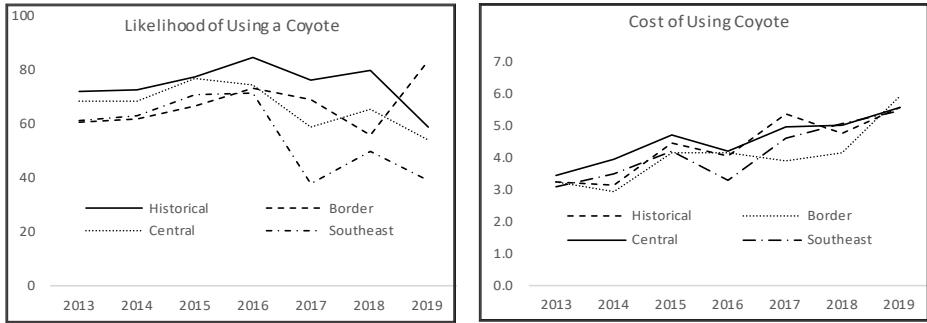
Source: own Estimations Based on CONAPO et al. (2013-2019)

Figure 3

Likelihood by sex of migrants who have relatives and friends in the United States hiring a coyote US\$ Thousands of Dollars

Instead of enabling irregular migration to the United States, social capital can favor some region of Mexico. This is the case for migratory regions in Mexico as classified by Massey and Durand (2004). The historical region composed of Jalisco, Michoacán, Guanajuato, Zacatecas, Durango, San Luis Potosí, Aguascalientes, Nayarit, and Colima contributed to earlier Mexican emigration to the United States.<sup>10</sup> Later, the populations of other Mexican regions also emigrated to the United States. Figure 4 shows that the likelihood of migrants who have relatives and friends in the United States and hire a coyote is consistently high in the historical region, and there is an obvious difference between this region and the southeast region. This result indicates an expected unequal distribution in social capital. However, the cost of a coyote is consistently high in the historical region, which may confirm Massey, Durand, and Pren’s (2016) premise, that a high price for a coyote is based on quality, contradicting the idea of a low-scale and free-entry coyote. Then, in sex as well as regional analysis, social capital does compensate for disparities and can exacerbate inequality, and for this reason is not a developmental strategy.

<sup>10</sup> Migratory regions of origin outlined by Durand and Massey (2003). Historical: Aguascalientes, Colima, Durango, Guanajuato, Jalisco, Michoacán, Nayarit, San Luis Potosí, and Zacatecas. Border: Baja California, Baja California Sur, Coahuila, Chihuahua, Nuevo León, Sonora, Sinaloa, and Tamaulipas. Central: CDMX, Guerrero, Hidalgo, México, Morelos, Querétaro, Puebla, Tlaxcala, and Oaxaca. Southeast: Campeche, Chiapas, Quintana Roo, Tabasco, Veracruz, and Yucatán.



Source: own Estimations Based on CONAPO et al. (2013-2019)

Figure 4

Likelihood of having relatives and friends given the use of a coyote and the cost by regions US\$ Thousands of Dollars

### 3. Coyotaje, inequality between countries, and imperialism

Irregular migration can be solved by the reduction of inequalities between countries. Scholars such as Milanović (2019), Castles (2004), and Spener (2009) associate irregular migration with inequality. According to Milanović (2019,149, italics in the original), migration is provoked by inequality between countries, which is expressed in higher wages and/or a better welfare state in core countries. The solution to this problem is circular migration and the spread of globalization:

The chief feature of my approach, on which it survives or falls, is the following proposition: *The native population is more likely to accept migrants the less likely the migrants are to permanently remain in the country and use all the benefits of citizenship...* Today, for a country to develop, it must be included in Western supply chains rather than trying to delink from the rich world... The importance of this change, both for real life and for what it tells us about the ideological justification of globalization as a way forward for the development of poorer countries, cannot be overestimated.

Castles (2004) asserts that irregular migration is partially caused by income disparities, which are due to the North-South divide, where the south has weaker economies and states than the core countries. According to Spener (2009), establishing states' discretionary migratory policies based on race and nationality, states inhibit people's mobility and also provoke irregular migration. Then, there is global apartheid between rich and poor countries.

In diagram 2, we present an input/output matrix, with core countries and their upper classes in rectangle 1, and lower classes and peripheral countries in rectangle 2. Poor people of peripheral countries are separated by core states' migratory policies based on race and nationality. Third World people and coyotes challenge core countries' enforcement, giving poor people the opportunity for a better life, and thus, for Spener, some kind of internationalism is the solution to irregular migration. The migrant-coyote relationship makes possible the transit from peripheral to core country as represented in the diagram 2 in the black circular areas.<sup>11</sup> This migrant-coyote relationship is exemplified in the diagram and symbolized by the diagonal arrow with the direction to the core countries.

Spener sees the free circulation of people as the solution to irregular migration, and Milanović supports circular labor migration but also open trade and financial markets. Despite singling out that the free circulation of people has been an illusion, and the state has intervened in controlling migration since Mercantilism, Castles (2004) also supports international trade as a solution to irregular migration. Amin (2009) demonstrates that capitalism is inherently exploitative and unequal, and capitalism is not a solution, but rather the cause of more inequality:

In capitalism the center/periphery contrast is defined, therefore, in economic terms: at one end are the dominating, completed capitalist societies; at the other end are the dominated, unfinished, backward capitalist societies. Economic domination (and its complement, economic dependence) is the product of the worldwide expansion of actually existing capitalism (Amin 2009, 101)

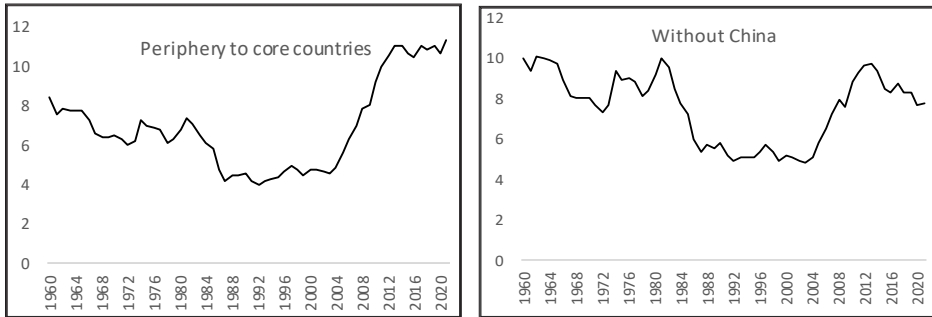
According to Amin, peripheral countries are not poor just because of internal causes or lags in productivity, but rather because of the international domination of foreign countries. Core countries utilize a market and the state to maintain their dominion over peripheral countries. In Patnaik and Patnaik (2021), core countries impose income deflation (low wages) on peripheral countries, as well as deindustrialization with the objective of gaining a cheap supply of labor, and a stable and cheap supply of commodities. Other scholars such as Arrighi (1983) have noted that inequality is caused not only by race and nationality but also the expansion of the state, which is

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<sup>11</sup> Despite empirical coyotes being from core countries or from the periphery (represented by the contour of the circle in the diagram 2), Spener believes the coyote comes from the peripheral country and with a high likelihood of being himself a migrant.

imperialism, *i.e.*, the power of one state to set out discretionary policies on trade, capital movements, and the transfer of labor over another (Arrighi 1990).

A measure of inequality between countries in the world is the gross national income per capita of peripheral countries over the gross national income per capita of core countries (Chase-Dunn, Lawrence, and Inoue 2011; Freeman 2019) in current US\$ dollars.<sup>12</sup> This measure is a standard measure of inequality between core and countries and shows that peripheral countries through the years have been unable to catch up with developed countries. The GNI per capita of peripheral countries as a percent of core's GNI per capita decreased from 1960 throughout the mid 1980s. After it bottomed for 15 years, it increased at the beginning of the 2000s, and finally, stagnated after 2012. From 1960 to 2021, it was from 8.4 percent to 11.3 percent, just 2.9 points in 52 years (see figure 5). However, the right-side panel of figure 5 shows that all this improvement is owing to China. Without China, the indicator was 10 percent in 1960, and ended up at 7.8 percent in 2021. Therefore, after 51 years, there has not been any improvement at all.



Source: own estimation with data from World Bank (2023).

Figure 5

Gross national income per capita of peripheral countries over the gross national income per capita of core countries, 1960-2022

<sup>12</sup> Core countries as un Freeman (2019). Unlike Freeman, we exclude countries equal to or less than 1 million inhabitants.

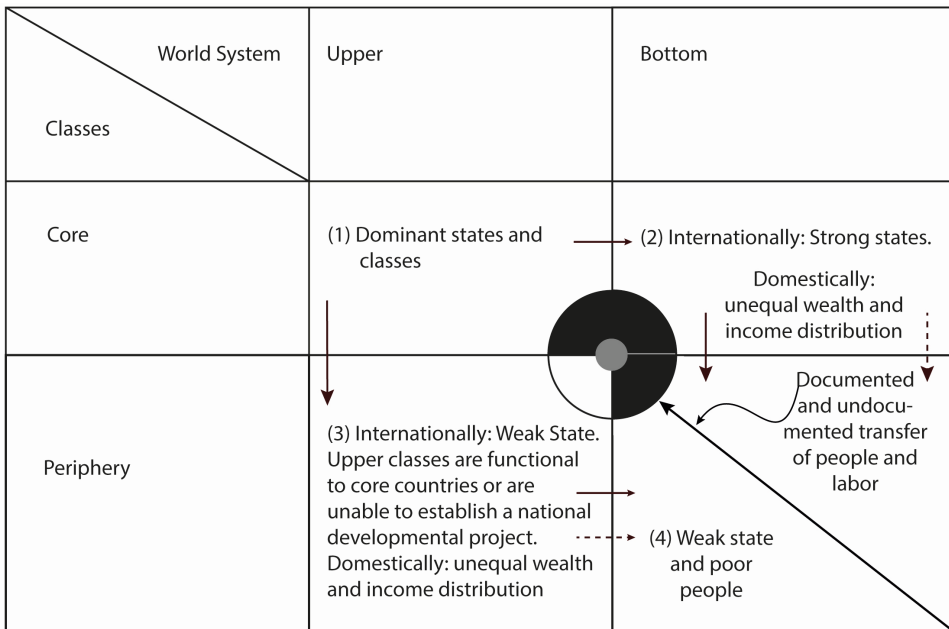
The subjection of peripheral countries by core countries is ignored in social capital theory and in the story of the migrant-coyote relationship. Inequality is not just caused by policies of race and nationality; rather, core countries impede the establishment of developmental policies in peripheral countries. As many scholars have suggested, economic opportunities are not for all countries, and in deciding developmental policies, core countries are served first (Reinert 2007; Ocampo 2016; Hicker 2018; Wade 2020; Isidro Luna 2022). In diagram 2, core countries include upper and lower classes. These lower classes are exploited by the upper classes, but on average, the lower classes of core countries have better wages and welfare than the lower classes of a poor country (rectangle II). Milanović thinks of this welfare differential as driving migration from poor countries to the core. Rectangle III shows upper classes inhabiting peripheral countries. These upper classes, according to Patnaik and Patnaik (2016; see also Brewer 1990), can be complicit with the big capital of the core countries and cooperate to exploit poor people in the Third World. Also, these upper classes of the peripheral countries try to emulate the way of life of rich people inhabiting core countries. Instead of supporting developmental policies, these upper classes in the Third World contribute to the impoverishment of their people. Rectangle IV indicates the peripheral countries and the lower classes of these countries. In these countries, the policies of core countries and international markets have caused what Polanyi (2001,167) says a competitive market does to non-market communities:

The catastrophe of the native community is a direct result of the rapid and violent disruption of the basic institutions of the victim... These institutions are disrupted by the very fact that a market economy is forced upon an entirely differently organized community; labor and land are made into commodities, which, again, is only a short formula for the liquidation of every and any cultural institution in an organic society.

Unfortunately, Polanyi does not analyze any core-periphery relationship. However, world-system theories and the school of unequal and combined development suggest that equality between countries is a solution to irregular migration. First, instead of focusing on individuals or groups as the theory of social capital does, core-periphery analysis focuses on the possibilities of poor countries and the people who inhabit them. Second, the theory of social capital and Clandestine-Crossing see coyotes as helping migrants and battling nation-states, some kind of social bandit as in Howsbawn (1959); however, we know that migrants who hire a coyote

and have relatives and friends in the United States pay a higher fee than migrants who do not have relatives and friends in the United States. These coyotes receive payment mostly in an international means of payment, such as dollars. Instead of helping migrants, coyotes may use them to capture this international wealth, exploiting the specific knowledge and local and border organizational links or capabilities they possess. Third, social capital can be distributed unequally as is the case in the Mexican migratory regions of origin. As Clandestine-Crossing coyotaje is autonomous, it is not a developmental policy. Finally, the solution to irregular migration must be based on strengthening rectangle IV, or in other words, peripheral countries catching up consistently with core countries. Such a solution requires that peripheral states be independent, and even the upper classes of peripheral countries and the lower classes of core countries should support these national projects of development in peripheral countries. In diagram 2, the straight arrows represent forces originating in core countries that inhibit the development of peripheral countries; however, different kinds of force can be unleashed if the upper classes of peripheral countries and lower classes in core countries contribute to peripheral country development (forces represented with dashed arrows). What must be done is some kind of development, as Desai (2023, 63) points out: "Other nations, to the extent they accept such ideas, are kept open to accepting the commodities and capital and supplying the input needs of the dominant nations, discouraging the only type of effective challenge to their dominance, namely state-led industrialisation." This kind of development may achieve more equality between nations. People do not like to abandon their native countries, so such development may help them remain in their hometowns and eliminate human smuggling and its attendant fees.

Diagram 2  
Clandestine-Crossing example and coyotaje in core-periphery analysis



Source: own elaboration

#### 4. Conclusion

We found that a Clandestine-Crossing coyote can be identified by using the EMIF Norte as a source of information, but this coyote charges a high price. We also found regional differences in the use of social capital in the Mexican region of origin, and that it is possible to arrive at a better understanding of, and solution to, irregular migration using center-periphery analysis rather than the theory of social capital. First, the theory of social capital is correct: there is an identifiable migrant-coyote relationship in which the migrants have relatives and friends in the United States and make the contact with the coyote in their hometown. However, the theory of social capital is also wrong: this type of coyote charges higher prices than coyotes who are hired by people who do not have relatives and friends in the United States; thus, this high price challenges the assertion of “social coyote.” Instead of helping migrants, a coyote’s fee could be based on the quality of their service or maximization of the rent that they capture in international

purchasing power. Besides, Clandestine-Crossing coyotaje is not a developmental policy because it is carried out autonomously by the migrant and the coyote, and social capital itself can be a source of inequalities.

A drawback of this article is the lack of sources of information. The multiple facets of the coyote and few databases available make this subject an opaque area of study. The EMIF norte can provide tendencies based on statistical analysis, which must be strengthened with theoretical and historical analysis. Subsequent research in this area must lead to: (1) determining if a Clandestine-Crossing coyotaje is identifiable in the population coming from Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador. This population has the intention to arrive in the United States, crossing through Mexico (in the recent years, Mexican migration to the United States has been of relatively minor importance compared to irregular migration from Central America; (2) a description of the transition from migrant or refugee to coyote, i.e., an explanation of how a person leading a lawful life decides to engage in an illegal business with a high price for their service; and (3) analyzing the role of the state. We describe an ideal state in this article, but there is a gap between an ideal state and an empirical state, and this empirical state can be a function of outlaw activities.

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## Appendix.

Table 1.A  
Number of observations of migrants by crossing year  
(No residents in the United States, events)

Year	Crossing Year	Using Coyote	Relatives and Friends in the United States
2013	3 755	2 398	1 610
2014	3 073	1 722	1 186
2015	3 340	1 763	1 303
2016	4 375	1 934	1 271
2017	2 083	1 015	654
2018	2 164	997	544
2019	2 505	1 204	612
2020	1 257	611	
2022	1 099	483	

Source: own estimations based on CONAPO et al. (2013-2022)

Table 2.A  
Number of observations, by sex and region, of migrants who use coyotes  
and have relatives or friends in the United States  
(No residents in the United States, events)

Year	Sex		Regions			
	Women	Men	Historical	Border	Central	Southeast
2013	421	1189	409	206	752	252
2014	289	897	352	157	528	148
2015	268	1035	354	185	603	160
2016	222	1049	352	163	581	174
2017	121	533	204	93	274	83
2018	100	444	153	58	261	71
2019	104	508	167	115	254	76

Source: own estimations based on CONAPO et al (2013-2019)

Note: regions do not include no available.