



Imago-politics of migration: mexicanities, xenophobia & the *fake* "other"

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Abstract Migrations historically build up the imaginary of territories and mold national identities; phenomena such as the migrant caravans (from Central America to the U.S.- Mexican border) introduce the opportunity to rethink the diversity of the representations that interact in the national identities. The false image of the migrant *invasion* results in the basic forms of nationalist propaganda: a threat against local employment, monsterization of the "other"; but such reiteration is far from the once known as a local effect.
In this context, the article proposes to update the notion of imago-politics, in order to understand the role of what is considered "fake" in the nationalist imaginary on migration.

Keywords National identities | Migration | Mexicanity | Xenophobia | Imago-politics

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"The Gulf War, Smart bomb falling down a chimney. 2500 missions a day, 100 days. One video of one bomb Mr. Motts, the American people bought that war. War is show business, that's why we're here".

Wag the Dog

1. Frame or fake: images are images

The notion of video-democracy - which emerged as a criticism of the dominance of television in the 1990s - anticipated the establishment of a critical paradigm worth evoking today: there is no politics without images, there is no politics without a screen, without artifice. Giovanni Sartori first alerted us to the risks of living in a tv-directed democracy, underlining the decontextualizing effect of the media image and the rhetorical power of communication technologies to influence political processes:

With television, authority is the vision itself, it is the authority of the image. It does not matter that the image can deceive even more than the words, as we will see later. The essential thing is that the eye believes in what it sees; and therefore, the cognitive authority that is most believed in is what is seen. What is seen seems "real", which indicates that it seems true (Sartori 1997, p.72).

This author's argument prospectively underlined the ability of media images to lie strategically and have an influence over public opinion: "In general, and generically, the vision on the screen is always a bit false, in the sense that it decontextualizes [...] The "force of truthfulness" inherent in the image makes the lie more effective and therefore, more dangerous (Sartori 1997, pp.99-100).

It is common to use the notion of framing nowadays to discuss the subjectivity of media approaches in the Social Sciences, and in some way or another, its use is inherent to the debate about the political effect of the mass media. Beyond hypodermic determinism, the pioneer imputation of the *fake* allowed us to notice the role of technology in the intersubjective construction of imaginaries about politics and its informational coverage.

It is necessary to consider that the media lens not only have a reductionist and biased effect, but is able to trick reality in increasingly sophisticated ways. In that sense, the term fake alludes in a general way to the fictitious power of an increasingly precise and convincing media apparatus, which nourishes not only the Orwellian imaginary of media totalitarianism, but also legal and ethical debates about Internet regulation in favor of democracy and human rights.

If in the middle of the fourth industrial revolution there was a crisis of misinformation with such spontaneity, it is precisely because we understood through



the struggle from repetition that framing is always present practice in the field of communications. But the widespread concern about misinformation currently feeds not only from the framing of this or that media agenda, but on the artificial development of hyper-realistic images against which the human eye is said to be almost helpless. With such a scenario, affirming that images do not lie today is simply an unsustainable issue in the face of perfecting open access editing software to edit photos and videos clearly. Speaking then of fake is a way of underlining the optimization of techniques and technologies to produce framing, in hyper-textual and hyper-visual terms. The question that not few futurologists raise in this regard can be summarized as follows: What will happen when they can massively appear things that did not happen?

It is fair to look at the teaser called "Synthesizing Obama: Learning Lip Sync from Audio"¹ as an example to see how much a real statement (a real event) can be simulated, and also to see to what extent the idea that everything related to the image can be *fake*. According to the technologist Aviv Odavya, the actual worrying matter about the proliferation of technologies and simulation consortiums is that we are witnessing the emergence of a generalized apathy over the real, an *infocalypse*: "we are in a really difficult place. It will only take a couple of great deceptions to really convince the public that nothing is real" (Warzel 2018).

This pointed-out problem goes far beyond the abuse of the current leitmotiv *fake news*. The feeling that the real is collapsing with the massification of virtual technologies brings with it a new kind of nihilism, an alarming carefreeness about the veracity of political events, about the very possibility of discerning against an image. In this sense, revisiting Sartori's idea requires us to consider the extent to which images cease to certify reality in times of the digital, to what extent the idea of *seeing to believe* ceases to operate in our political imaginary.

The *homo videns*, as Sartori pointed out, understands from and only through the image, for him the word is merely descriptive of what is shown on the screen; image inflation threatens the capacity for human abstraction, against the articulation of the word, of ideas; and this was especially worrying for him in regards to the appearance of cyber-screen (1997: 58). But opposing the expectations, with the Internet we write and read more than at any time in history. The word is still a fundamental communication tool and, although it is restricted by the short margins of the platform and the effect of immediacy of social networks, its use does not seem to be in dispute.

What should be reconsidered from Sartori's thesis is that in front of the digital screen the word atrociously reveals its symbolic character. As a representation, the word is an image of the real but not the real in itself. Before becoming merely informative, the word is an aesthetic form that achieves, for better or worse, synthesizing a worldview: word and image are forms of representation and as such

¹ https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=58&v=MVB6_o4cMI&feature=emb_title



exercisers of meaning, even if they are unidirectional and even stereotyped, even when the form prevails to the detriment of the content.

In that sense we should also reconsider the notion of Milan Kundera's imagology (Immortality, 1988). While ideology uses images to concentrate and keep ideas latent (the visions of the world), the imagology uses a minimum number of words to decorate an image that pretends to speak for itself, because everything is said -the author states. But the real problem is not that the image replaces the word, but that the word could saturate the space of understanding in the form of a spectacular and denotative (hypertextual) image, in the form of an informative head or a scandalous headline. Certainly, with the digital screen, word and image are leveled in presence before the spectators, but in critical terms both the word and the image lose credibility in the *fake* scenario.

While the film *Wag The Dog* (1997) showed the artisanal assembly of a war in the studios of a television station, in order to divert the attention of the audience - "there is no war if there is no image of the bomb" -, the criticism of Aviv Odavya about the massification of simulation technologies is puncturing today about the machining automation of deception, about the development of intelligent software with easy operation: "Our algorithmically optimized world is vulnerable to propaganda, to erroneous information, to dark publicity [...] so much that it threatens to undermine a cornerstone of human discourse: the credibility of facts" (Warzel 2018).

Faced with the possibility of infocalypse, the discussion of the so-called falsification of reality opens a prolific gap for the study of the imaginary about technology that occupy our political agenda globally. If I may extend it this way, the ambient pessimism around the *fake* is another symptom of what Antonio Baeza calls the *matrix syndrome*:

[...] the subordination of man to the machine is a sign of pusillanimity that can only emerge from the loss of centrality of the humane in the society of our times: the machine and the absence of feelings, its remoteness from biological mechanisms, its priority that has been accorded to performance, its dependence on some kind of power (economic and / or political, in any case considered as something generally hidden in its true scope and objectives) make it the symbol of a dehumanization that raises fears that all human beings, without greater efforts, will know how to justify (2008, p.292).

The proliferation of dystopian representations of digital technology largely fuels the belief that today it is no longer known what is true or false, that *facticity* escapes from us, and that this leads to an inevitable feeling of alienation and social polarization, in an irreconcilable and tragic fragmentation of public opinion. The so-called virtualization of society reveals an unprecedented diversity of behaviors, worldviews and conflicts that compromises our fundamental categories for the sociological treatment of the "other" and its representations. The study of digital interactions allows us to penetrate into the logic of a technological struggle for social recognition, which magnifies in size and image the differences between the groups and enhances the



brawl. The technological *display* operates as a powerful display of identifications and distinctions that legitimizes the canon and punishes contempt, which exalts the bond and decrees taboos.

The exponential growth of hate and network polarization require us to review in a heuristic way the complex network of stigmatizing representations about group behaviors. Facing virtuality, the abrupt reality of racism, homophobia, misogyny, aporophobia and all kinds of discrimination makes evident the radicalization of group identities and subsequent battles for a supremacy with moral pretext.

Preventing deception has become the common demand of those who advocate the regulation of the Internet; especially since it has been shown that there are algorithms that favor outrage via fake news (Crocket 2017). Ana María Olabueaga, for example, unveils the formula to generate more traffic and engage audiences with a type of content that generates moral dilemmas, which will divide positions and enhance the disengagement:

The mechanics are simple. If 98% of the income of social media platforms - Twitter among them - comes from advertising, and brands seek the most popular content to advertise their products or services in that space, the algorithm of any platform is designed to privilege and pay the contents that generate more attention. Scandalous content, and preferably negative, generates much more interest and traffic than other that does not have these characteristics. In one sentence: indignation sells (2019, p. 229).

As the creative director of a fake news² agency relates, the algorithmic detection (tracking) of psychopathologies such as phobia allows us to anticipate what type of content they will trigger, will generate more traffic and greater assiduity. If the screen creates fear for certain audiences, it is because false information stimulates the ghosts and real concerns of a person. The *fake* is not a matter of massification but about segmentation of messages that seem real, since they appeal to the ideological and emotional convictions of a person. The strategic objective of fake agencies is to ensure that what appears on the screen of our social networks is tailored to our credibility.

In this context, we propose to bring an updated turn to the notion of imago-politics, in order to understand the role of the *fake* in the nationalist imaginary on migration. In a nutshell, we seek to understand the effect of overexposure to the image of global migrant caravans in a media ecosystem infringed by fake and polarization. At the end of 2018, following the Central American migrant caravans, various media disseminated what were the most common themes and arguments of the false news that contaminated the informative ecosystem³. It is striking that in a very similar way, anti-

² As part of the investigation, an interview was made with the former creative director of a Mexican fake news agency that stood out for keeping the account of the political party that is now in power, as well as the opposition during the 2018 election campaigns.

³ As examples it is suggested to consult the Millennium and Uno Noticias notes, respectively: <https://www.milenio.com/virales/las-fake-news-alrededor-de-la-caravana-migrante>



migrant campaigns in Mexico and the United States will operate around a supposed infiltration of criminal cells; From drug trafficking to terrorism, there is a record of many false news that represent caravans as human mobilizations in which terrible criminals hide.

The decontextualized images of bloody police officers (taken in 2013 in central Mexico), allegedly attacked with violence by Central American migrants trying to rid the border barricades, are of great relevance. Also the assembly of banners with requests of absurd migrants ("In Honduras we do not eat beans, if you are going to support it to be something worthy"); or the use of images of a clothing dump (in Spain) where Central American migrants allegedly threw out the clothes they did not like ("because they were not branded").

The *fake* image of the migrant *invasion* results in the basic forms of nationalist propaganda: threat against local employment, monsterization of the "other"; but such reiteration is far from the once known local effect. The computing power exposes hate speech in all directions. Not only is the nationalism of the countries receiving migrants enhanced, but in the migrant communities themselves the sense of belonging is reinforced in terms of the appropriations and neutralizations of those stigmas that mark them.

What we understand by exposure highlights the idea of a strident effect in the senses of belonging at stake in migratory phenomena. The exposed identities are border identities, and therefore conceived in a multidirectional manner. The exposed identities are pushed from several directions, they are tension points fed by gross preservation schemes (see protection).

2. Identities exposed (facing the image about the "other")

Under the sociological angle, the discussion about nationalism and xenophobia requires a priori to get into the issue of identities and their neighborhoods. The social representation of the other always begins with an evocation of the place of origin. The expression "I am from ..." places territory before individual characteristics, giving greater weight to shared attributes of origin than to singularity.

Territorial stereotypes function as a mirror in which a series of generalizing ideas about the other are reflected and valued at first sight - which at the same time make them imagine their values and their behavioral tendencies. And it is in this speculation that it is evident that social recognition is a negotiation of positions in itself and a dynamic questioning about the socio-imaginary order.

It is worth remembering that the topic of identity was positioned within our disciplines from the claim of certain marginal groups that vindicated the right to

<https://www.unotv.com/noticias/portal/internacional/detalle/estas-son-las-fake-news-de-la-caravana-migrante-714178/>



recognition and social inclusion in the western culture in the 1960s, and that it was precisely the means of communication who generated a transparency effect that allowed us to visualize them in the global environment (Vattimo 1990). These images highlighted the contemptuous fixation and segregative power of cultural stigmas, and underlined the latent conflict that vibrates in the background of media representations around identities.

The identity *boom* in our academies is precisely related to the urgency of studying social conflicts under the hypothesis that at the bottom of every social relationship there is always a struggle for recognition and positioning, and this in some way or another it relates to media visibility. For the sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, for example, the struggle to be recognized is defined as a magical act through which “a practical, virtual, ignored or denied group becomes visible and manifest before other groups and before itself, for it to give testimony of its existence as a known and recognized group that aspires to institutionalization” (1980, p.66).

The struggles for the recognition of the so-called minority groups highlight the hierarchical (and unequal) assessment of identities in our societies. If it is affirmed that there are no identities without conflict it is - precisely - because what is at stake is the claim of difference; or more specifically: the questioning of homogeneity and the canon of the legitimate. The study of identities is in itself the demystification of the unitary, the exposition of fragmentations.

To study identities in the migratory context is to investigate both the logics of group self-recognition, as well as the media stereotypes and fake news that come into play to recognize the other. Identities constitute struggles to claim difference and question the positive appreciation of one identity over another. It is a sociological construct that allows us to study social interactions, and therefore allows us to understand migratory transits as rearrangements in the identity senses.

The border symbolizes a cultural margin between two nations, which in turn idealize in block a unique identity, to the detriment of the natural diversity of the Nation-States. Social identities always refer to the crisis of the homogenizing imaginary, and from that hypothesis we think that, depending on the territories, the fake image of migration exposes the nationalist imaginary and the senses of belonging and differentiation on a global scale.

3. New Mexicanities: from Haitijuana to Oaxacalifornia

In the literature on Mexicanities, the text *The Cosmic Race* (1925) stands out, where José Vasconcelos points out that it can be explained as an identity consolidation of confrontation. The writer underlines the role of the United States in the definition of Latinity. Latin America is a mestizo territory that is defined by a physical and cosmogonic border line. The Mexican or the Latin emerges from the colonizing power - be it Europe or the United States.



In that tenor, neither the Mexican nor the Latin are defined from ethnic purism but from a mestizo ethos that faces, from colonial memory, the invading threat. Although Vasconcelos speaks about Mexicanness in the singular, it should be noted that the idea is oriented towards the plural: Mexicanities. From that angle, we talk about new Mexicanities to emphasize the reconfiguration of national imaginary against migration in the XXI century.

Mexicanity is not an essentialist qualifier, but a reference of diversity that enables the study of identities in shock contexts. The social hierarchies in Mexico and in the world fall in different ways in the legitimization of certain groups over others. The idea of otherness points out precisely how the idea of a “we” is generated in opposition to an “other”, making a clear tabulation of the differences inherent within any group, whether it is local or migrant, national or foreign, Catholics or Protestants.

The 2016 immigration emergency on the Baja California border constitutes an opportunity to study the reconfiguration of the imaginary about Mexicanity. Specifically, we propose to address the complexity of the Mexico-United States border from the Haitian exodus, baptized by the Mexican press as “Haitijuana”, and framed by the truncated housing plan “Little Haiti” - thought of a religious initiative to provide decent housing for stranded migrants, who chose to remain in Mexico with work permits or temporary residence for humanitarian reasons, or for those who were also then in the process of naturalization due to birth or marriage⁴.

Headlines such as “the Mexican dream” represent well the institutional and media concern about the arrival of six thousand Haitians to Mexico. According to this argument, they could not cross into American territory before the closing of borders of former President Obama (policy of Dry Feet, Wet Feet) and the Trumpian wall project; however, “they decided to stay in Mexico.” Although the “Little Haiti” project did not consolidate and the migration crisis of 2016 decreased significantly (it is estimated that today there are around 500 Haitians in Tijuana), the presence of Haitians generated an acute alert to a mayor migration problem. The media look towards Haitians in Mexico had a magnifying effect on Central American migration and deportations of nationals to Mexican territory.

It is common to read false information on the number of Haitians who settled in Tijuana and its surroundings, which is accompanied by the conviction that their arrival is synonymous with crime, prostitution, diseases and unemployment. Common phrases that can be heard in other latitudes such as: “come to take our jobs,” “go away, there is not enough work here,” or “we no longer fit,” are the constant evidence that behind the representations of the migrant there is a fundamental repetition of fears exploited in the fake news. The number is exaggerated and the image of the poor,

⁴ In articles 30 and 37 of the Political Constitution of the United Mexican States, as well as in the norms related to the Law of Nationality and Naturalization, it is decreed that by birth on Mexican soil, both children and parents have the right to nationality (by via ordinary, automatic or special) and can be recognized as Mexicans if requested.



evicted migrant, of the problem migrant who comes to take away opportunities is amplified. Statistically, it is clear that the problem of Haitian migration does not compare with the average flow of the world's busiest border. The underlying problem is that the image exploited by the media was that of blackness, that of the other that can be identified by its skin color.

As Claudia B. Portela, coordinator of the main shelter for migrants in Tijuana (Salesian Father Chava Breakfast) stated, the problems of stranding and deportation were exacerbated with Trump's arrival at the presidency of the United States; However, there has always been disinterest in this regard by the authorities and a large part of civil society, since the Latin origin (see *mestizo*) of migrants is not visible. "They get confused with us. Haitians do not; everyone sees them. "

In this context, the Haitian case constitutes an iceberg that allows us to visualize, from the surface, a deeper reflection. Or if we are allowed to extend the etymological metaphor, an ice floe with percussive effects, whose glacial detachment represents the influence of fake on the recomposition of territories and identities. Thus, we take as a starting point the stranding and naturalization of Haitians in Mexico to thoroughly discuss the global migration issue; the socio-political urgency of deportations; the criminalization of the so-called "paperless"; and the military threat of borders.

The Mexico-United States border is the busiest in the world and therefore a symbolic point of tension where identity conflicts and social integration crystallize in the face of the 21st century: the senses of belonging and distinction; the sense of nation and territory; stigmatization and discrimination (by race, religion or origin); post-colonialism and socio-cultural miscegenations (see hybridizations, syncretisms, appropriations and integrations); bi-nationality; multiculturalism; the emergence of virtual communities and derived emotional connectivities, just to mention some of the edges of the problem.

The image of the Haitian strand in Mexico constitutes a gap to discuss the international migration agenda. Talking about "New Mexicanities" is a way to discuss the exacerbation of nationalisms and ethnicities in the context of the most recent global migrations. According to press reports, at the end of November 2017, it was estimated that around 30 newborns were registered as Haitian-Mexican, and it was recorded that there were nine marriages between people of both territories by November 2017. The figures are significant at a symbolic level, they generate media debates about the new faces of Mexicanity.

This same idea allows us to highlight how little is present in the national imaginary the recognition of Afro-Mexican culture and its inherent miscegenations. In addition, it highlights the almost zero attention to the naturalizations of Latin Americans or foreigners from other latitudes (such as the exiles of the Chilean and Argentine dictatorships, or those of the Spanish civil war) and what to say of the deportees who after decades were torn from their new homes Migrations historically compose the territories and shape identities, and phenomena such as the Haitian allow us to rethink the diversity of representations at play around this phenomenon.



So, when talking about new Mexicanities, we intend to underline the live tensions of miscegenation in post-colonial societies. Mexicanity is not a qualifier of national purity, but of diversity in contexts of inequality. The social hierarchies in Mexico and in the world fall in different ways in the legitimization of certain groups over others. As an example, I cite the case of French people of African origin who narrate the unconscious discrimination that they live daily, being perceived as foreigners because of their skin color, even coming from a third generation. Without knowing the country of origin of his great-great grandparents, his identity is questioned in a territory that he imagines and affirms himself as white.

For Vasconcelos, Latin America is a territory that is defined by a border line both physical and cosmogonic. This perspective on national-territorial identity allows us to observe the contours of the nation-state based on the projects integrating the new territories. The institutionalization of myths (the settlement of History, the ideological promotion of being together) obtains its legitimacy when it comes to thinking of ourselves as Mexicans or Latinos in the face of the colonizing power - be it Europe or the United States, but this becomes even more evident when Central American migration is focused by the media lens.

In that sense, the study of national identities constitutes a gap to study not only the myths of the Nation-State but also the myths of individual and group identities that persist in our mediatized societies and in our academies. To study identities is to investigate both the logics of group self-recognition and the stereotypes that come into play to recognize the other. Identities constitute struggles to claim difference and question the positive appreciation of one identity over another. It is a sociological construct that allows us to study social interactions from the idea of conflict, and therefore allows us to understand migratory transits as rearrangements in the identity senses.

Migratory flows produce rearrangements in the sense of belonging and distinction not only of locals, but also of migrants. According to the anthropologist Maud Laethier (Lot bò dlo), there is a record of camouflages and religious conversions in the case of Haitian migrants residing outside their country of origin. The researcher points out that, knowing the stigma about Voodoo beliefs, many practitioners choose to integrate into the regions where they reside through new religious cults, even if that does not necessarily mean spiritual conversion. Integration also requires a new face and this explains the interest of many religious cults to meet the needs of migrants. A similar transformation happens on the other side of the coin; Haitian migrants who do not practice voodoo reinforce their national identity through a secret conversion to voodoo in their new places of residence. The thesis of the anthropologist is that national identities are exacerbated in every way within the migratory problem. The natives reinforce their national identities and their sense of territory before the arrival of the *fuereño* (regardless of whether they were also migrants at the same time); and migrants, exposed to new environments, can at the same time reinforce their sense of belonging to an extended territory.



Another example of this is that of the Yalalag Zapotec community in Los Angeles California. Parallel to the anti-immigrant policies of the American government and the visibility of "white supremacy" movements, the idea of "Oaxacalifornia", a community extension of various indigenous cultures that mainly reside in Los Angeles, is born.

What draws attention to this phenomenon is that the number of inhabitants on Mexican soil in that community is less than the one currently living in the United States. However, the sense of belonging to the territory is exacerbated and funds are currently raised to remodel and expand the town's pantheon (Villa Hidalgo), which is seen as the resting place of the community (both Oaxaca and Los Angeles). It should also be noted that the community in Mexico is based mainly on remittances sent from the United States. In other words, the territory on Mexican soil is preserved from the outside. Examples like this allow us to think about the global reconfiguration of identities and the complexity that their study represents.

In 2018, the news about the most recent caravan of Central American migrants seeking to reach the United States via Mexico was present in the media agenda. And it even bordered a presidential statement addressed to the White House to the digital threats of Donald Trump to prevent the passage of migrants (*bad hombres*) to the United States. For the first time during the Trump administration, the presidency publicly defended national sovereignty. Trump threatened to militarize the border and even intervene from Mexican soil to slow the caravan's passage. What is underlined here is that the migration agenda has now become one of the key pieces of foreign policy worldwide. And this highlights the scope of the rearrangements we have been insisting on. As particle accelerators, digital media generate the reformulation of nationalist myths since the collision. Rhetoric of the image, propaganda of the shit, arché-engineering, imago-politics or as he prefers to be called the thesis is repetitive: frame or fake, images are images.

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