

**FOREIGNERS VS. MIGRANTS: COLOMBIA'S APOROPHOBIA IN BORDER CONTROL\*****Abstract**

In recent years, Colombia, has witnessed a transformation in terms of human mobility. In a contradictory scenario where economic wealth, growth and opulence overlap with hunger, unemployment, conflict and poverty, Colombia experienced two main forms of human mobilization: internal displacement from rural areas to cities as a result of the armed conflict, and emigration looking for new opportunities abroad. However, recently Colombia has become a key point for human mobility—due primarily to the international human mobility from Venezuela. As a result, it is today an immigration, emigration and transit hot spot. The Covid-19 pandemic and an increase of human mobility in Colombia have emphasized the contrast between two groups: those who arrive by foot and those who can afford aerial transport. We will argue that during the Covid-19 pandemic, national authorities in the main cities have adopted differing treatments towards low- income migrants, as opposed to foreign tourists/investors. To do this, we will focus our analysis on the restrictions imposed to enter the country, as a policy has been structured to exclude migrants crossing by foot trying to reach a main city, while appealing to foreign tourists/investors. This paper aims to show how the authorities' narratives separate the terms “migrants” and “foreigners” as starkly different, giving them a distinctive treatment when entering the country. “Migration” usually refers to the poorer individuals from Latin America (predominantly Venezuelan), while the concept of “foreigner” typically refers to the wealthy people from the global North. In this sense, the way in which a person enters the country determines how they will be treated by authorities and communities. This is a consequence of a normalized aporophobia, as Cortina defined, that undervalues migrants and favors foreigners.

---

\* **Daniel Ospina Celis**; Master's candidate, Universidad de los Andes and **Lina María Moya Ortiz**; Master's candidate, Universidad de los Andes. Contact: [df.ospina11@uniandes.edu.co](mailto:df.ospina11@uniandes.edu.co) and [lm.moya10@uniandes.edu.co](mailto:lm.moya10@uniandes.edu.co).

**Keywords:** Aporophobia, Migration, Colombia, Venezuela, Migrant, Foreigner

## Résumé

Au cours des dernières années, la Colombie a connu une transformation en matière de mobilité humaine. Dans des circonstances contradictoires où la richesse économique, la croissance et l'opulence côtoient la faim, le chômage, les conflits et la pauvreté, la Colombie a connu deux principales formes de mobilisation humaine. Ces dernières sont le déplacement interne des zones rurales vers les villes en raison des conflits armés et l'émigration à l'étranger à la recherche de nouvelles opportunités. Cependant, la Colombie est récemment devenue un point-clé de la mobilité humaine, principalement en raison de la mobilité humaine internationale en provenance du Venezuela. Par conséquent, elle est aujourd'hui un point chaud de l'immigration, de l'émigration et du transit. La pandémie de Covid-19 et l'augmentation de la mobilité humaine en Colombie ont mis en évidence le contraste entre deux groupes : les individus qui arrivent à pied et ceux qui ont accès à un transport aérien. Nous soutiendrons que pendant la pandémie de Covid-19, les autorités nationales des principales villes du pays ont adopté des traitements différents envers les migrants à faibles revenus, par opposition aux touristes et investisseurs étrangers. Pour ce faire, nous concentrerons notre analyse sur les restrictions imposées pour entrer dans le pays. En effet, la politique colombienne a été structurée pour exclure les migrants traversant à pied, tout en faisant appel aux touristes et investisseurs étrangers. Cet article vise à montrer comment les récits des autorités séparent les termes « migrants » et « étrangers », en leur donnant un traitement distinct à l'entrée dans le pays. Le terme « migration » fait généralement référence aux individus les plus pauvres d'Amérique latine (principalement les Vénézuéliens), tandis que le concept d'« étranger » est plutôt utilisé pour désigner les personnes riches en provenance du Nord. En ce sens, la manière dont une personne entre dans le pays détermine la façon dont elle sera traitée par les autorités et les communautés. Ceci est la conséquence d'une aporophobie normalisée, selon la définition de Cortina, qui sous-estime les migrants et favorise les étrangers.

**Mots-clés :** Aporophobie, migration, Colombie, Venezuela, migrants, étrangers.

## INTRODUCTION

In a contradictory scenario where economic wealth, growth, and opulence overlap with hunger, unemployment, armed conflict, and poverty, Colombian institutions try their best to respond to an antipodean reality. The differing treatment given to foreigners and migrants in border control shows at its best how wealth and poverty determine the ambivalent policies of the Colombian government. In an effort to attract tourists and investors, Colombia has neglected poor migrants. During the Covid-19 pandemic, pauperized migrants—mostly from Venezuela—were forbidden from entering the country through its land borders, which are the only ones many have access to, while rich foreigners were invited to arrive in Colombia through its air borders.

This differing treatment, we argue, entails a discrimination grounded in the economic situation of individuals. More exactly, it is a consequence of a normalized aporophobia (using Cortina's definition) that undervalues migrants and favors foreigners. This paper aims to show how local narratives and public policies picture 'migrants' and 'foreigners' as starkly different and therefore, are treated in different ways. The former are wealthy people predominantly from the global North, while the latter are poor or in-need individuals from Latin America—mainly from Venezuela. One easy way to separate and give different institutional answers to these two groups is by the means used to enter the country. Poor people fleeing from poverty would usually cross the border (and the country even) by foot—this is why lately Venezuelans are known in Colombia as *caminantes*—, whereas rich people would have the money to afford an airplane ticket. Favoring

one economic means over the other shows how committed Colombian institutions are to human dignity and equality.

Massive immigration might seem new in the Colombian context. After all, during the 19th and 20th centuries Colombia experienced little immigration “as a result of conditions including political violence, recurring economic crises, excess labor, and poor infrastructure”.<sup>1</sup> Political instability, internal conflicts, a poorly maintained infrastructure in an immense country, land concentration in very few selected families and other factors also had a negative impact in immigration.<sup>2</sup> Emigration, in contrast, was far more common. Millions of people sought refuge abroad looking for better opportunities or fleeing persecution, violence, and poverty. The Colombian armed conflict caused many to be internally displaced, while others opted for transnational emigration, especially to the United States, Ecuador, and Venezuela.<sup>3</sup>

Since the mid-2010's, Colombia can no longer be considered as a country alien to massive immigration. Doing so would only reinforce a perception of temporality and novelty in Venezuelan migration to Colombia. In 2021, we know that it is neither temporary nor novel. Venezuelans have migrated to Colombia and other Latin American countries in the past few years. As of December 2020, it is estimated that 1.7 million people from Venezuela were in Colombia according to the Inter-Agency Group on Mixed Migration Flows (GIFMM for its acronym in

---

<sup>1</sup> Dayra Carvajal, *As Colombia Emerges from Decades of War, Migration Challenges Mount* (Migration Policy Institute, 2017).

<sup>2</sup> Inés Sanmiguel, ‘Japoneses En Colombia. Historia De Inmigración, Sus Descendientes En Japón’ (2006) 23 *Revista de Estudios Sociales* 81 <<https://doi.org/10.7440/res23.2006.07>> accessed 10 April 2021.

<sup>3</sup> Raquel Álvarez De Flores, ‘La Dinámica Migratoria Colombo-Venezolana: Evolución Y Perspectiva Actual’ (2004) 9 *Geoenseñanza* 191.

Spanish).<sup>4</sup> This number could be much higher considering that almost 54% of the people who migrated Venezuela have a non-regular migratory status, which adds uncertainty to the above estimates.

The situation is critical. Colombian institutions should engage in long-term commitments with the vulnerable population fleeing from hunger and poverty back in Venezuela. However, as we will show, the Colombian government has shown little interest in engaging in these sorts of commitments, but instead in a voluntary or non-voluntary way, has created institutional boundaries for migrants. Preferring the rich foreigner over the poor migrant is not only an expression of aporophobia, but it also illustrates the lack of interest in securing dignity and human rights of Venezuelan migrants.

Due to the pandemic, the Colombian government decided to close its land border with Venezuela, while allowing the departure and arrival of international flights. It remained closed until July 2021. What could explain the differing treatment received by Venezuelans arriving by foot, compared to other foreign nationals arriving by air? Aporophobia, we argue. The desire to exclude the underprivileged. To do this, the paper is divided into five sections. First, we will explain and address the concept of ‘aporophobia’, a relatively new term that has gained certain recognition in Spanish, but that remains almost unknown in English language. Later, we will briefly outline the crisis faced in Venezuela and the consequences that it had on human mobility in the region. Third, we will present the Colombian migratory policies and how the government has responded to the Covid-19 pandemic on this issue. Fourth, we will show how the differing

---

<sup>4</sup> R4V Platform, ‘*Situation Respuesta a los Venezolanos*’ <<https://r4v.info/es/situations/platform/location/10044>> accessed 24 May 2021.

treatment received by foreigners and migrants is an expression of aporophobia in Colombia's border control policy. This section builds on what we have argued earlier and critically analyzes the decision made by the Colombian Government of closing of the Venezuelan border while allowing the free entrance of tourists through airplanes. Finally, we will present some concluding remarks.

#### PART 1. WHAT IS 'APOROPHOBIA'?

Naming is important. When social phenomena are named, they can be studied, theorized, identified, and criticized. If they are unbearable or unacceptable, resources can be allocated to tackle them. Social phenomena such as racism and xenophobia have a name, which makes it easier to identify their occurrence. Naming allows society to beware of unwanted phenomena that could destroy democratic coexistence. It might seem that, in 2021, every social interaction has been named and those concepts are broadly accepted. However, the exclusion or fear towards poor or underprivileged people had no name until very recently, and it is far from being broadly accepted.

Adela Cortina, a Spanish philosopher, coined the term 'aporophobia' to describe the fear towards underprivileged or poor people.<sup>5</sup> The word derives from the Greek *áporos*, which means pauper or resourceless, and *phobia*, that stands for fear. As a social fear that has no rational basis and expresses prejudice, aporophobia is very similar to homophobia, xenophobia, and islamophobia. It is not only about having actual fear when interacting with a poor person; it is also about despising, even involuntarily, the underprivileged.

---

<sup>5</sup> Adela Cortina, *Aporofobia, el rechazo al pobre. Un desafío para la democracia* (Paidós 2017) 14.

In 2017, the *Real Academia Española* (Royal Spanish Academy), the institution whose mission is to ensure the stability, study, and promotion of the Spanish language, introduced ‘*aporofobia*’ to its dictionary, following Cortina’s definition. This recognition has had little effect on the English-speaking world. Aporophobia is not listed as a word in the Cambridge Dictionary nor in the Merriam-Webster Dictionary. Scholarship in the social sciences has also been unaware of the existence of this expression. Most of the academic writing regarding ‘aporophobia’ has come from Spanish-speaking academics that know Cortina’s definition and usually write their texts in Spanish.

Due to the humble development of ‘aporophobia’ in English-speaking scholarship, we will briefly describe its major characteristics. This framework will allow us in the next section to critically analyze the differing treatment that Colombian authorities give to foreigners and migrants. Although our focus is on border control, this phenomenon can be seen in many other social interactions: foreigners are respected and honored, while migrants are seen as a problem. The former are believed to be wealthy, while the latter are believed to be poor and in need. In this sense, foreigners are an honor to have, whereas the migrants are a problem to solve.

Cortina argues that what underlies the exclusion of migrants and refugees is not their belonging to a different country, but their poverty. “Fear towards poor people is what motivates rejecting races and ethnicities that usually are underprivileged and, therefore, cannot offer anything (or it seems they can’t) to society”<sup>6</sup>. There is an asymmetry between the privileged person who despises poor people and the one who is rejected. The latter is seen as an inferior being, which justifies its exclusion. Not only the underprivileged are inferior, they are also a burden and socially

---

<sup>6</sup> Adela Cortina, *Aporofobia, el rechazo al pobre. Un desafío para la democracia* (Paidós 2017) 21.

useless. Modern societies depend on mutual exchange and reciprocity. According to Cortina, the poor seems incapable of offering something in exchange for what they receive<sup>7</sup>. They are rejected because it seems that they only cause problems, even if that is not true. The underprivileged are left out of the reciprocity that rules societies; they are neglected and left behind. Something that Cortina also highlights as an irony and which is the main difference between classism and aporophobia is that, in this last case, even poor people discriminate. This imaginary of the poor migrant is then adaptable in order for them to be always seen as useless, as a burden and in some cases, as competition.

Aporophobia can be seen in very different scenarios. As Cortina argues, sometimes we are not even aware that we are excluding the poor or preferring the rich. Colombian society and institutions value not-Colombians depending on where they come from and how wealthy they are. Local narratives differentiate migrants and foreigners as starkly different. Their only difference, according to the dictionary, is that migrants usually have the will to live and work in a different country, while a foreigner is anyone that is not from that country. This means that every foreigner that settles in Colombia should be regarded as a migrant too. However, public discourse and local narratives see migrants and foreigners as two different groups of people. Their difference, unlike what the dictionary prescribes, rests in how wealthy they and the country they come from are.

Europeans and U.S. Nationals are usually considered as desirable people who must be attracted to invest in or visit the country. This desire is understandable. Tourism and foreign investment are key aspects of economies such as ours. However, we have created a cultural imaginary around the concept of 'foreigner'. In Colombia, foreigners are usually investors, tourists

---

<sup>7</sup> Adela Cortina, *Aporofobia, el rechazo al pobre. Un desafío para la democracia* (Paidós 2017) 125.



or workers that come from the global North. Developed nations are seen as richer, cleaner, and more advanced and civilized. Following this stereotype, a European that has established in the country would be a foreigner (regardless of their real economic status), not a migrant. Colombians have naturalized that if someone comes from a 'better' or richer nation, they are a foreigner.

According to Colombia's Migration Authority, foreigners are white, blond, and seem wealthy.<sup>8</sup> Additionally, the foreigner is delighted to be in the country, enjoying of our main tourist attractions. The National and Local Governments promote policies to be attractive to foreigners, as it is for example, to have a faster special line when doing immigration procedures. In this narrative, Colombia wants them to stay, to feel at home. In a tweet released on 1 May 2021, this is how the Colombian government depicts foreigners:



<sup>8</sup> Migración Colombia, (1 May 2021) <<https://twitter.com/MigracionCol/status/1388658496313384963>> accessed 24 May 2021.

Figure 1. Tweet by *@MigracionCol* on May 1, 2021. *Translation: Foreign national, we want you to feel at home. That's why there is a special place for you in the zones of Migración Colombia at the international airports. Follow the green line and perform the migration control faster.*

In contrast, the term ‘migrant’ is reserved for Latin Americans or people from the global South. Migrants usually enter the country through its land borders, are fleeing from poverty or violence, and have almost no goods. They are shown as unhappy people, poor on the streets, asking for money. Colombia was not a country of migrants. Having its own socio-economic problems, few societies view the country as a destination one. Colombia experienced small and specific waves of immigration during the 19th and 20th centuries, yet they are not as considerable as they are in other Latin American countries such as Chile or Argentina. As we will explore in the following section, Venezuelan migration represented a new and almost unknown reality for Colombia back when it started. This said, in 2021 it is no longer valid to depict this situation as a temporary or unexpected one.

Massive immigration has been around in our context for at least six years. And yet, Colombia’s Migration Authority emphasizes the difference between foreigners and migrants. A tweet released on the same date as the previous reflects how migrants are seen:



Figure 2. Tweet by @MigracionCol on May 1, 2021. *Translation: If your legal status is irregular and would like to be a part of the Temporary Protection Statute, you'll have to certify that you were in Colombia before January 31st, 2021.*<sup>9</sup>

The difference between foreigners and migrants in Colombia cannot be explained exclusively as xenophobia. Economic reasons support if a person or community is considered one or the other. Venezuelans are migrants while almost any other non-citizen is a foreigner. This division responds solely to an economic judgment. There are few cultural differences between Colombia and Venezuela. We share a common colonial history, independence was fought as a whole, and neighbouring relations have existed from time ago. Culinary tradition is also similar, as well as religious symbols and beliefs. Perhaps the most notable difference between one and the other is

<sup>9</sup> Migración Colombia, (1 May 2021) <<https://twitter.com/MigracionCol/status/1388522349264314374>> accessed 24 May 2021.

the accent. The exclusion of Venezuelan migrants does not respond to cultural motives (or at least culture is not its driver). It lies on the misconception that migrants are poor, are prone to robbery, need public assistance, and arrive in Colombia only to create problems, to make the already difficult situation even worse. This line of thought can easily appear when the targeted community has no means of subsistence at all and is obliged to live from precarious jobs or charity.

As we will show, Venezuelans used to be what Colombian authorities and media narratives call 'foreigners', back when the country's economy was booming. Nowadays, Venezuelans in Colombia are 'migrants'. They are poor, unemployed, uneducated people who arrive in Colombia by land. Their situation is dramatic. Colombian institutions are aware, yet their actions materialize aporophobia. Foreigners are welcomed to visit the country, while Venezuelan migrants are seen as a problem, a crisis.

## PART 2. VENEZUELAN CRISIS AND MIGRATION

A person's or community's economic situation determines if the term 'migrant' or 'foreigner' is applicable. As a country's economy is dynamic, and, since no country is exempt from an economic crisis, the condition of migrant or foreigner in a destination country is not static or permanent. Being considered as one or the other can change overtime if the economic situation changes. In this sense, a person, or a community can at first be seen as a foreigner and later as a migrant. First, as wanted because it is seen as trusted or a producer of wealth and richness. However, this same person or community years later can dramatically become a migrant. This is what happened to most Venezuelans in Colombia. In 40 years, Venezuela went from being perceived as a role model for Latin Americans, to a country who is nowadays in social, humanitarian, and economic

crisis. Venezuelans were at some point regarded as foreigners in Colombia; today are seen as migrants. They are poor people who require government assistance and represent a burden for public institutions.

For many years, Venezuela was one of the economic centers of Latin America. It was its economical North Pole Star, which meant that countries in the region looked up to it. As Rodriguez Rojas argues, during the decade of the 1970's Venezuela was a parallel reality to the one going on in the rest of Latin America. While countries in the region were struggling with the consequences of the Import Substitution Industrialization model—that led to neoliberal reforms in the following decade—Venezuela's economy was booming. While other Latin American economies were in a constant state of “continuous decrease and successive stalemate”<sup>10</sup>, Venezuela's was profiting from the increase in the oil barrel's price. It went from \$4 USD to \$30 USD, an increase of 7.3 times its original price. By 1970, Venezuela was producing over 3.8 million barrels per day.<sup>11</sup> In 1976, the oil industry was nationalized. Although the nationalization process had a negative impact on production—it reduced in about 50%—, by the end of the 1990's Venezuela was producing 3.5 million barrels per day.

During that time, the migratory flow used to be from Colombia to Venezuela. Back then, Venezuela used to be “the rich neighbour. A country we look up to with a mixture of jealousy and

---

<sup>10</sup> Pedro Rodríguez Rojas, ‘Venezuela: del neoliberalismo al socialismo del siglo XXI’ (2010) 34 *Política y Cultura* 188.

<sup>11</sup> Robert Rapier, ‘Charting The Decline Of Venezuela's Oil Industry’ *Forbes* (29 January 2019) <[www.forbes.com/sites/rrapier/2019/01/29/charting-the-decline-of-venezuelas-oil-industry/?sh=74b2e7784ecd](http://www.forbes.com/sites/rrapier/2019/01/29/charting-the-decline-of-venezuelas-oil-industry/?sh=74b2e7784ecd)> accessed 24 May 2021.

affection”.<sup>12</sup> Even since the 1950’s, as Escobar (2020) points out, Venezuela was a country of destination for people not only in the region but in Europe and the United States. Since the 1970’s, almost one million Colombians migrated to Venezuela.<sup>13</sup> Many factors fostered this migratory flow: “neighbourly relations, the permeability of the borders and the communication resources”.<sup>14</sup> These same factors aid Venezuelan migration to Colombia right now; they favor human mobility for both countries. Seen as an adequate destination, Venezuela was the first choice for many who wanted (or needed) to leave the country.

However, the Venezuelan paradise would not last. Venezuela is now plugged into a deep economic, social, political, and humanitarian crisis. Poverty, economic destitution, and famine are normal features in its daily panorama. Most of its inhabitants are not living but surviving on a daily basis. As a result of the Venezuelan situation, the human mobility dynamics have shifted between Venezuela and Colombia.<sup>15</sup> Political and economic instability motivated many Venezuelans to leave their country. According to the Venezuelan Situation Report of the Organization of American States<sup>16</sup>, almost 5.4 million Venezuelans have fled the country. It is

---

<sup>12</sup> Melba Escobar, *Cuando Éramos Felices Pero No Lo Sabíamos* (Seix Barral 2020) 13.

<sup>13</sup> Dayra Carvajal, *As Colombia Emerges from Decades of War, Migration Challenges Mount*. (Migration Policy Institute, 2017).

<sup>14</sup> Raquel Álvarez De Flores, ‘La Dinámica Migratoria Colombo-Venezolana: Evolución Y Perspectiva Actual’ (2004) 9 *Geoenseñanza* 191.

<sup>15</sup> OIM. *Perfil Migratorio de Colombia* (OIM 2020) <[www.cancilleria.gov.co/sites/default/files/planeacion\\_estrategica/Transparencia/estudio\\_oim\\_con\\_el\\_apoyo\\_de\\_colombia\\_nos\\_uno\\_y\\_otras\\_entidades.pdf](http://www.cancilleria.gov.co/sites/default/files/planeacion_estrategica/Transparencia/estudio_oim_con_el_apoyo_de_colombia_nos_uno_y_otras_entidades.pdf)> accessed 24 May 2021.

<sup>16</sup> Organization of American States. *VENEZUELAN MIGRATION AND REFUGEE CRISIS - Situation Report Dec. 2020* (OAS 2020) <[https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/OAS\\_Dic20-crisis-of-Venezuelan-migrants-and-refugees-situation-report.pdf](https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/OAS_Dic20-crisis-of-Venezuelan-migrants-and-refugees-situation-report.pdf)> accessed 24 May 2021.

expected for this number to rise to 7 million by the end of 2021. As Humans Rights Watch (2020) has informed, “Venezuela is facing a severe humanitarian emergency, with millions unable to access basic healthcare and adequate nutrition”.<sup>17</sup> By September 2018, it had an annual hyperinflation near 500.000%.<sup>18</sup> According to the 2019–2020 National Survey of Living Conditions (ENCOVI) published by the Andrés Bello Catholic University in Venezuela, 79,3% of the Venezuelans cannot afford the basic food basket, 96% are in poverty and 79% are in extreme poverty.<sup>19</sup>

The economic crisis in Venezuela is not only due to the misadministration and corruption that reigns the country; it is also the consequence of the time bomb created by a traditionally rentier economy. According to Palma (2011), rentier economies are those “that depend on the rents generated by economic activity, generally the export of some basic product such as oil, are unable to experience a process of sustainable development, because in depending on changing and volatile economic activities subjects them to external realities beyond their control, transforming them into vulnerable and changeable economies”.<sup>20</sup> Venezuelan economy depended on the oil market, which allowed them to have a booming economy for many years. However, as Rapier (2019) establishes, there are two main causes to the decline of the oil business in

---

<sup>17</sup> Human Rights Watch, ‘World Report 2021: Rights Trends in Venezuela’ (2021).

<sup>18</sup> OIM. *Perfil Migratorio de Colombia* (OIM 2020) <[www.cancilleria.gov.co/sites/default/files/planeacion\\_estragica/Transparencia/estudio\\_oim\\_con\\_el\\_apoyo\\_de\\_colombia\\_nos\\_une\\_y\\_otras\\_entidades.pdf](http://www.cancilleria.gov.co/sites/default/files/planeacion_estragica/Transparencia/estudio_oim_con_el_apoyo_de_colombia_nos_une_y_otras_entidades.pdf)> accessed 24 May 2021.

<sup>19</sup> ‘Encuesta Nacional de Condiciones de Vida 2019-2020’ <[https://assets.website-files.com/5d14c6a5c4ad42a4e794dof7/5fo385bb99f3ad48111aed96\\_Presentaci%C3%B3n%20%20ENCOVI%202019-Educacion\\_compressed.pdf](https://assets.website-files.com/5d14c6a5c4ad42a4e794dof7/5fo385bb99f3ad48111aed96_Presentaci%C3%B3n%20%20ENCOVI%202019-Educacion_compressed.pdf)> accessed 24 May 2021.

<sup>20</sup> Pedro A. Palma, ‘Risks and consequences of rentalist economies: The case of Venezuela’ (2011) 165 *Revista Problemas del Desarrollo* 35 <[10.22201/iiiec.20078951e.2011.165.24971](https://doi.org/10.22201/iiiec.20078951e.2011.165.24971)>.

Venezuela.<sup>21</sup> First, the expropriation from the government to big oil companies, such as Exxonmobil and ConocoPhillips. Given the lack of guaranties for international investment, the country pushed away “the expertise required to develop the country's heavy oil” (Rapier, 2019). Second, “[the] government failed to appreciate the level of capital expenditures required to continue developing the country's oil” (Rapier, 2019), which means that when the oil price was high, the country had a time of bonanza that was not used to diversify the markets and find new opportunities. The decrease in the production and the volatility of the oil market, mixed with corruption and misadministration, led to a fatal economic crisis.

The economic crisis combines with political instability, corruption, and human rights violations perpetrated by the Government. According to HRW (2020), “a fact-finding mission appointed by the United Nations Human Rights Council (HRC) found high-level authorities responsible for atrocities that they believed amounted to crimes against humanity. The government of Nicolás Maduro and its security forces are responsible for extrajudicial executions and short-term forced disappearances and have jailed opponents, prosecuted civilians in military courts, tortured detainees, and cracked down on protesters.”<sup>22</sup> This has motivated many to search for international protection, causing a refugee crisis in neighbouring countries like Colombia. Many must remain in an irregular migratory situation as they don't have the documents or the economic resources to access a visa or special permit. These factors collided and caused many to

---

<sup>21</sup> Robert Rapier, ‘Charting The Decline Of Venezuela's Oil Industry’ *Forbes* (29 January 2019) <[www.forbes.com/sites/rrapier/2019/01/29/charting-the-decline-of-venezuelas-oil-industry/?sh=74b2e7784ecd](http://www.forbes.com/sites/rrapier/2019/01/29/charting-the-decline-of-venezuelas-oil-industry/?sh=74b2e7784ecd)> accessed 24 May 2021.

<sup>22</sup> Venezuela: UN Inquiry Finds Crimes Against Humanity, 2021.



migrate from Venezuela, most of them with the intention of settling in Colombia and others to continue their journeys to Ecuador, Peru and even Chile.

The Covid-19 pandemic caused a worldwide public health and social crisis, which had an important impact on the migrant population. Safety is now determined by having many privileges: having a job that can be done remotely, having a house, having access to public services, etc. For the migrant population, staying at home as mandated by the government is sometimes unbearable or impossible. If there is no comfortable house, no food, and no income, staying at home is a burden. The mandatory lockdowns and quarantines implemented to prevent the spread of Covid-19 “increased vulnerability of those most socially and economically deprived”.<sup>23</sup> Poverty and inequality, as a result, have become more evident in the Colombian context, affecting especially to the migrant community.

According to the Organization of American States, “as the Covid-19 crisis brought economic activity to a near-standstill and countries imposed tight restrictions on movement, the difficulties faced by Venezuelan migrants and refugees increased. Therefore, the challenges of assistance, protection, and integration of this vulnerable population have been exacerbated”.<sup>24</sup>In Colombia, a very particular measure was implemented by the national government that affects exclusively migrants: the closure of the land border with Venezuela. In the following sections, we will show

---

<sup>23</sup> Patel, J., Nielsen, F., Badiani, A., Assi, S., Unadkat, V., Patel, B., Ravindrane, R. and Wardle, H., ‘*Poverty, inequality and COVID-19: the forgotten vulnerable*’ (2020) 183 Public Health 110 <[10.1016/j.puhe.2020.05.006](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.puhe.2020.05.006)>.

<sup>24</sup> Organization of American States. *VENEZUELAN MIGRATION AND REFUGEE CRISIS - Situation Report Dec. 2020* (OAS 2020) <[https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/OAS\\_Dic20-crisis-of-Venezuelan-migrants-and-refugees-situation-report.pdf](https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/OAS_Dic20-crisis-of-Venezuelan-migrants-and-refugees-situation-report.pdf)> accessed 24 May 2021.

how this particular situation impacts in a disproportionate way thousands of people and has its origins in the desire to exclude the poor and leave underprivileged Venezuelan migrants out of the country.

### PART 3. COLOMBIAN MIGRATORY POLICIES AND COVID-19

As outlined above, Colombia was not seen as a country of destination for many, in spite of the Government's effort to attract tourists and investors—what the authorities call 'foreigners'. Unlike other Latin American countries such as Argentina, Brazil, or Uruguay, which received a considerable number of immigrants between 1850 and 1930, Colombia was not an attractive destination for big investors nor for poor and adventurous migrants.<sup>25</sup> According to the International Organization for Migration, during the 20th century, Colombia only experienced two migration waves. Both were emigration waves, in the 1960's–1970's and 1980's, mainly to Venezuela, the United States, and Ecuador<sup>26</sup>. That's why we have concurred with the scholarship that depicts Colombia as a country with passive immigration history. Yet, a few years ago everything changed. Citing data from the Colombian National Administrative Department of Statistics, the OIM shows that in 2005 there were around 110.000 immigrants in Colombia, a very small number compared with the one of 2020 shown above (approximately 1.7 million). Although

---

<sup>25</sup> Inés Sanmiguel, 'Japoneses En Colombia. Historia De Inmigración, Sus Descendientes En Japón' (2006) 23 *Revista de Estudios Sociales* 81 <<https://doi.org/10.7440/res23.2006.07>> accessed 10 April 2021.

<sup>26</sup> OIM. *Perfil Migratorio de Colombia* (OIM 2020) <[www.cancilleria.gov.co/sites/default/files/planeacion\\_estragica/Transparencia/estudio\\_oim\\_con\\_el\\_apoyo\\_de\\_colombia\\_nos\\_une\\_y\\_otras\\_entidades.pdf](http://www.cancilleria.gov.co/sites/default/files/planeacion_estragica/Transparencia/estudio_oim_con_el_apoyo_de_colombia_nos_une_y_otras_entidades.pdf)> accessed 24 May 2021.

massive immigration is considerably new, it is just a phenomenon that has grown in dimension, not a completely new one.

The efforts done by Colombia to attract people from other countries focused on foreigners and not migrants mainly because of racial and economic interests, since the elites believed that the only way to improve a deplorable national situation was with the immigration of white Europeans.<sup>27</sup> In spite of the efforts to attract foreigners, for example through the promotion of the country as a tourist destination or as an investment center, in recent years, against all odds, Colombia has been receiving migrants. Contrary to the ideal of the ruling class, most of the migrants come from Venezuela, looking for better opportunities and fleeing from poverty and hunger, as we already described. With little or no money, they have been wrongly understood as a burden for the State. This phenomenon has also been wrongly understood as temporary. Venezuelan migration is far from being temporary because the people migrating are arriving in Colombia to stay in Colombia or, perhaps, transit to Ecuador or Perú. Few are willing to return to their home country.

Since 2015, when the migration from Venezuela to Colombia increased its magnitude, until a few months ago,<sup>28</sup> the Colombian Government understood and faced the Venezuelan situation as temporary. Thus, the policies to respond to the arrival of migrants from Venezuela were thought to give temporary solutions. For example, the Special Stay Permit (*Permiso Especial*

---

<sup>27</sup> Inés Sanmiguel, 'Japoneses En Colombia. Historia De Inmigración, Sus Descendientes En Japón' (2006) 23 *Revista de Estudios Sociales* 81 <<https://doi.org/10.7440/res23.2006.07>> accessed 10 April 2021.

<sup>28</sup> This conception of the Venezuela Situation as a temporary phenomenon has probably changed from the institutional point with the promotion of the Temporary Protection Statute which intends to be for 10 years, with the possibility of renewal.

*de Permanencia*, known as PEP), was an authorization given by the Colombian Government to the migrant population issued for 90 days, renewable for periods of the same length, not exceeding 2 years.<sup>29</sup> This permit gave regular migratory status to many migrants. Nonetheless, far from being temporary, migration has continued. The amount of people who migrate from Venezuela to Colombia increased in such a way that this kind of policies that give a temporary solution to a permanent phenomenon are in the end useless and show how massive immigration has surpassed the capacity of the Colombian Government.

Because of the Covid-19 pandemic, countries around the globe had to restructure their institutions and make important public policy decisions. Migration policies also had to be rethought. In Colombia and around the world, many questions have risen in this aspect. One of the most common is if international borders should stay open or not. As of May 2021, international borders are not 100% open. There are important public health reasons that support countries who close their international borders to avoid the entrance of new variants of the virus or the entrance of people coming from active hotspots (India, for instance). Countries have to trade-off between taking care of those living in their territory and restricting international mobility or allowing access to everyone who intends to enter the country, regardless of whether they are nationals or not.

In this particular and very complex scenario is where we situate our case study. Colombia closed its borders with Venezuela (land and fluvial), while maintaining its air borders open, which

---

<sup>29</sup> Resolution 5797/2017, *Por medio de la cual se crea un Permiso Especial de Permanencia*. Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

means that international flights keep on arriving from many other countries—only few exceptions have been placed and they respond to clear public health reasons.

This decision became a barrier for most of the Venezuelans who want to migrate to Colombia, since most of them enter the country on foot. They don't have the money to afford a bus or an airplane ticket.<sup>30</sup> And even if they could afford a bus ticket (not very common), the land border is closed. In addition, most of them don't have a passport, as it has become almost impossible to have one in Venezuela or to renovate it.<sup>31</sup> Given the lack of institutional capacity, the corruption within the institutions and the lack of economic resources to pay for it, having access to a passport in Venezuela is extremely rare.<sup>32</sup> Nonetheless, none of the previous barriers has stopped Venezuelans from crossing the border during the pandemic. They are crossing through irregular crossings (known as *trochas*), exposing themselves to “a series of protection risks and are in need of basic goods and services such as food, water, and shelter”.<sup>33</sup> According to this same source, in 2021, it is estimated that 162,000 migrants (*caminantes* in its roughest sense) will cross the border through *trochas* endangering themselves and those around them. The danger, it seems, is worth taking.

---

<sup>30</sup> ACAPS, COLOMBIA/VENEZUELA The Caminantes: needs and vulnerabilities of Venezuelan refugees and migrants travelling on foot, 2021.

<sup>31</sup> HRW, World Report 2019: Rights Trends in Venezuela, 2021.

<sup>32</sup> Guillermo D. Olmo, ‘Por qué es tan difícil conseguir un pasaporte para salir de Venezuela’ *BBC News Mundo* (29 August 2018) <[www.bbc.com/mundo/noticias-america-latina-45292923](http://www.bbc.com/mundo/noticias-america-latina-45292923)> accessed 8 April 2021.

<sup>33</sup> ACAPS, COLOMBIA/VENEZUELA The Caminantes: needs and vulnerabilities of Venezuelan refugees and migrants travelling on foot, 2021, 1.

The border with Venezuela was officially closed by the Colombian Migration Unit on March 14, 2020, not even 10 days after the first case of Covid-19 was confirmed by the Ministry of Health on March 6, 2020. It is a paradox that the first case arrived in a flight from Italy but the first border to be closed was the land one exclusively with Venezuela. According to the decree that closed the Venezuelan land border, this decision responded to the necessity to prevent and contain the possible propagation of Covid-19.<sup>34</sup> Although it seems like a plausible explanation, why is the first border to be closed the one with no relation at all to the origin of the virus?

Reopening the border was an overnight decision. On May 31, 2021, the Colombian Government issued Decree 580/2021. It orders reopening all of the land and fluvial borders except the one with Venezuela, which was expected to remain closed at least until September 1<sup>st</sup> 2021. However, in a very unexpected shift, on June 1, 2021, through Decree 746/2021, the Government decided to open as well the border with Venezuela. However, the reason why this change was made is still unknown, but aporophobia remains a reasonable explanation.

In the meantime, on March 11, 2020, the government decided to allow the arrival of people coming from France, Spain, and Italy (the pandemic hotspot at the time) just asking them to properly isolate. Then, on March 17, 2020, the Migration Unit announced the closing of the land, maritime and fluvial borders<sup>35</sup> with the rest of the neighbouring countries, whereas the air ones remained open. Only wealthy foreigners able to afford an airplane ticket could enter the country.

---

<sup>34</sup> Migración Colombia, 'Cierre de frontera con venezuela una de las nuevas medidas para contener el coronavirus' <[www.migracioncolombia.gov.co/noticias/cierre-de-frontera-con-venezuela-una-de-las-nuevas-medidas-contener-el-coronavirus](http://www.migracioncolombia.gov.co/noticias/cierre-de-frontera-con-venezuela-una-de-las-nuevas-medidas-contener-el-coronavirus)> accessed 24 May 2021.

<sup>35</sup> Migración Colombia, 'Desde hoy y hasta el próximo 30 de mayo, todos los pasos fronterizos terrestres, fluviales y marítimos, estarán cerrados' <[www.migracioncolombia.gov.co/noticias/desde-hoy-y-hasta-el-](http://www.migracioncolombia.gov.co/noticias/desde-hoy-y-hasta-el-)

Although the Airport El Dorado in Bogotá closed its operation for 5 months, from March 23 to September 1, 2020, the air border was never closed, as it remained open for humanitarian flights. The reason to reopen the operation at Colombia's biggest airport was on behalf of a new phase of economic reopening. Yet the other borders remain close, despite the current human mobilization through *trochas*. In the following section we will explore in-depth how the differing border control policies of the Colombian Government materialize aporophobia as they discriminate Venezuelan migrants, we argue, based on their poverty.

#### PART 4. FOREIGNERS VS. MIGRANTS

The Covid-19 pandemic has changed how people travel and settle across countries. Governments have closed their borders with certain nations when there is an imminent threat to public health due to a localized peak. This narrative suggests that the only consideration in doing so is epidemiology or public safety. We believe there are subtler—even unseen—reasons to restrict international mobility that intertwine with the pandemic.

In the previous section we described Colombia's migratory policies regarding Covid-19. In short, Colombia's land border with Venezuela was closed on March 14, 2020. It was the first border to be closed. In practice, migrants were excluded from entering the country (through legal pathways, at least). On March 23, 2020, Colombia's biggest international airport suspended its operations, commercial flights were cancelled, and only humanitarian flights were in motion.

---

[proximo-30-de-mayo-todos-los-pasos-fronterizos-terrestres-fluviales-y-maritimos-estaran-cerrados>](#)  
accessed 24 May 2021.

Foreign nationals were too excluded from entering the country, as humanitarian flights were usually available for Colombians only.

In March 2020, the virus was mostly in Europe, and it had just started spreading in Latin America. Why would the Colombian government close the border with Venezuela first? It seems erratic. One could argue that it was done to avoid Venezuelan migrants from incoming and worsening the social and economic situation that Colombia would face during 2020 due to mandatory quarantine. There is also a public health rationale that could be retrieved: to avoid such an immense number of people flooding Colombian cities, endangering citizens, and occupying public space. As we underlined earlier, migrants usually are homeless and unemployed, which means that they spend a lot of time on the streets.

This rationale, however, sees migration of poor Venezuelans as a problem. It reinforces that migrants are a burden for local institutions and cities. From this point of view, land borders must be closed first because people coming from Venezuela by foot have nothing to offer Colombian society. They will only worsen the public health situation created by Covid-19, and cause trouble to their arrival cities. Closing the border with Venezuela before suspending aerial commercial transit from countries with known Covid-19 peaks such as the United States, Spain or Italy is an expression of aporophobia in Colombia's migratory policy. Poor migrants are left out and neglected because they represent a challenge for cities and local authorities. A challenge that they are not willing to face.

During some time, most foreigners and migrants were unable to enter the country. Commercial flights were cancelled, and the border remained closed. A striking difference should be noted: aerial borders were not definitively closed, whereas land borders were. Humanitarian



flights kept entering the country, transporting nationals and some foreigners. They had a higher cost than a regular flight, which reinforces that only wealthy foreigners (and Colombians alike) were able to book a ticket. Economic situation, once again, is a key determinant of how easy it is for someone to arrive in Colombia.

Once commercial international flights resumed in September 2020, foreigners were once again massively welcomed. Migrants, on the other hand, continued to be excluded from entering the country. There is no justification for this disparate treatment that does not involve some sort of aporophobia. The pandemic is not contained in Colombia and foreign nationals—even presenting a negative PCR taken 96 hours prior to departure—represent a risk to public health just as migrants do.

In the case of foreigners, the risk they represent to public health might seem worth taking because they contribute to the economy. Whether they travel as tourists or as investors, foreigners are not a problem; on the contrary, they are part of the solution to the economic crisis caused by the pandemic. Migrants are the opposite. If they were also seen as a key element for Colombia's economic recovery, land borders would not remain closed while aerial borders are open. As noted earlier, Venezuelans are considered a burden for Colombia's institutions. This is why the government has not resumed normal transit through the border. In a desperate attempt to prevent by-foot immigration, Colombia has neglected the ones in need. Wealthy foreigners are encouraged to travel; poor migrants are kept away. It is poverty what drives them out of Venezuela. It is poverty what keeps them out of Colombia.

## CONCLUSION

During the pandemic, Colombian institutions have preferred foreigners over migrants. From a certain point of view, it makes sense. When tourists and/or investors arrive in Colombia they contribute in a positive way to the economy. Migrants are seen as incapable of doing so. Their vulnerability is their greatest enemy: as a vulnerable population, migrants are believed to be useless and to only cause trouble.

However, border control and immigration are not about whether someone contributes to the economy or not. Or at least it shouldn't. Utilitarianism should not be the moral principle that guides migration policy. If it is, as the Colombian case shows, poor people will be left out because they appear to have nothing to offer. This line of thought justifies aporophobia. It is unbearable that someone is not received in a destination country only because he or she is not wealthy. Therefore, it is unbearable that Colombia decided to restrict Venezuelan migration while receiving foreign nationals arriving by plane.

There are various ways to tackle aporophobia and create more inclusive societies. Cortina supports the transformative power of an ethical education as one of the most relevant strategies to end aporophobia. In a more philosophical argument, she defends Kantian cosmopolitanism as an adequate political solution to aporophobia (and xenophobia too). Cortina expands the Kantian concept of hospitality—the state must welcome strangers but is not required to allow their permanent settlement—from being a visitor to being a guest<sup>36</sup>. Which means that the states should be required to allow the permanent settlement of strangers (specially the underprivileged). According to her, Kant's original formulation of cosmopolitanism was incomplete because it

---

<sup>36</sup> Adela Cortina, *Aporofobia, el rechazo al pobre. Un desafío para la democracia* (Paidós 2017) 161.

ignored two Kantian principles: human dignity and the primitive property of land<sup>37</sup>. A similar approach was proposed by Zavediuk, who defends that Kantian cosmopolitanism should be complemented with Kantian ethics<sup>38</sup>.

To this day, the border with Venezuela is the only one that remains closed. Although authorities might say it is to be prepared for the massive mobilization from Venezuelans or to prevent the spread of Covid-19, none of these reasons are as solid as aporophobia: the fear of national and local authorities to let a population in that is seen as a burden. However, to find a solution for aporophobia, it is at first important to acknowledge this social phenomenon and to understand the impact that this silent guest has in key aspects such as national and local policies. To acknowledge this is important because this misconceptions of poor migrants vs. rich foreigners can have tangible repercussions in people's lives, as we have seen in this case. However, deciding to ignore this phenomenon only perpetuates discrimination towards people who are in need but that does not mean they are not productive with the right integration policies. Is the perpetuation of a constant state of crisis.

---

<sup>37</sup> Adela Cortina, *Aporofobia, el rechazo al pobre. Un desafío para la democracia* (Paidós 2017) 162.

<sup>38</sup> Nicholas Zavediuk, 'Kantian Hospitality' (2014) 26 *Peace Review* 170.