



Round Table: Responses by Victoria Stone-Cadena

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Question 1: The rhetoric surrounding smugglers is packed with graphic images of violence and exploitation. What does your research indicate? Are smugglers really parasites profiting on human desperation, or, at the end of the day, do they provide a service to those on the move? How do we move the conversation forward?

There is a long history of international migration from southern highland Ecuador to primarily the United States that follows mercantile trade routes from the early twentieth century. Following the 2000 economic crisis, migration to Spain and other European countries increased but plateaued in the late 2000s. [My long-term ethnographic work](#) in the area shows that people work in migration facilitation for a variety of reasons. In fact, the role of middlemen in the economic strategies of rural households can be connected to regional labour migration between the



highlands and the coast, and even between *haciendas* [1] (see [Kyle and Siracusa 2005](#)). In migration testimonials, perceptions of smugglers ranged widely. While some migrant facilitators were cast in a favourable light, as serving a purpose in the community, others were known to be exploitative and untrustworthy. In most cases, people clearly distinguished between the *coyote* (facilitator) and the moneylender, who often exerted the most aggressive pressure on the migrant households.

The global preoccupation with border enforcement has helped create the conditions for the current market for facilitators and for a flourishing array of clandestine routes. One can ask: what is the purpose of diverting public scorn onto these ‘parasitic’ smugglers? The conversation should focus on the overriding economic, political, and social conditions that compel people to migrate, as well as the historical and political relationships between migrant nation-states and their destinations.

Question 3: Another myth connected to smuggling is the one pertaining to its organisation. We hear of smugglers organised into cartels, networks or transnational groups, but also of small-scale operations. What does your work suggest, and what does that say about irregular migration?

There is a wide range of smuggling activities, and people work in migrant facilitation for various reasons. Because of the long history of migration in Ecuador, there are families who have worked as facilitators for generations, likely connected to the first wave of migration in the 1970s. Others work as *coyotes* for only short periods of time, relying on contacts established during a family member’s migration or their own experiences.

I have heard accounts of young men who worked for smugglers because they attempted to migrate, failed, and had to reduce their debt. There is such a wide range of actors: recruiters, transporters, money-lenders, safe house providers, informants, corrupt officials; could all of these people be part of a sophisticated network or industry? My [research](#) suggests that irregular migration is better seen



as a complex, highly contingent, series of small-scale networks of actors that overlap without having their centres directly connected.

[\[1\]](#) Hacienda is a type of landholding structure in Mexico and throughout Latin America which relied upon largely indigenous laborers to work the land. Laborers would live on the land and were able to use small plots to grow subsistence crops. In Ecuador, this was written into law as the Huasipungo system. It was only eradicated during the Agrarian reforms of the 1960s and early 1970s.

See more responses here:

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