



Roundtable: Responses by Rebecca Galemba

written by Rebecca Galemba
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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?

Both, and possibly neither. From my research in the rural Mexico-Guatemala borderlands, I have learned that there is no single type of smuggler. People engage in smuggling, whether of humans or commodities, for diverse reasons as they also respond to changing political-economic circumstances. Smugglers may also provide necessary economic opportunities for their communities while simultaneously perpetuating underdevelopment, corruption, and prevailing inequalities.



Many assume smuggling is inherently damaging to formal economies and political systems, but this is a question that needs to be ethnographically examined rather than assumed. Smuggling is usually embedded within, rather than necessarily subversive of, the political economy. At the Mexico-Guatemala border, smuggling does little to upset the regional balance of power. Border smugglers rarely compete with legal businesses; instead they subsidise them. My own work has shown that smugglers usually do not struggle for political change, but help maintain the status quo that enables them to operate.

Some smugglers take advantage of others, but many also struggle to get by. Smuggling is often just one of the multiple income-generating activities upon which the rural poor depend for survival. Peasants living in the borderlands began to smuggle basic commodities to earn a living as agricultural reforms made their lives as farmers increasingly precarious. If peasants had the same access to markets as large businesses and corporations, we would just call their smuggling 'trade'. The ethics and legality of economic opportunity are structured by national and international policies that privilege and facilitate particular kinds of economic exchange as they criminalise competing alternatives.

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?

The term 'irregular migration' cloaks in bureaucratic jargon what are politicised judgments about preferred forms of movement and the people who desire to move. It neglects how states sort human beings into and out of categories of belonging based on arbitrarily imposed and policed national boundaries. As [De Genova](#) (2004) writes of the legal production of Mexican illegality, shifting legal categories and their uneven application directly produce irregular/regular migrants and the moral judgments attached to them, rather than anything inherent about a particular movement or person moving.



State regulations and policing patterns alter the forms of smuggling, redistribute risks and rewards, and make smuggling and smugglers more dangerous, expensive, and violent. At the Mexico-Guatemala border, residents used to provide rides to Central American migrants, which they described as providing assistance. But as Mexico militarised under a US-led security agenda, smuggling increasingly shifted into the hands of sophisticated smugglers, cartels, and gangs – those with the physical and monetary means to corrupt, evade, bully, or merge with state policing forces and officials. Yet policy makers continue to myopically focus on the smugglers and cartels. They ignore the political-economic conditions, which they helped create, that caused this shift to a new type of smuggler. The criminal smuggler narrative fails to account for how states and escalating policing and criminalisation produce their own nemeses – the criminal smuggler and the illegal [migrant](#) – while also conjuring up the mirror image: the corrupt and criminal state.

See more responses here:

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