



Re-signification of Political Borders and Criminalization of Migrants in the MERCOSUR: Do Argentinean Anthropologists Have Anything to Say?¹

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Introduction

As in other parts of the world, the study of the migratory phenomenon in Argentina was originally the terrain of disciplines such as demography and economics, which, employing macro-structural approaches, sought to explain why people moved from rural to urban areas and how these movements affected the population dynamics of the nation at large.² Likewise, historians were involved early on in the analysis and documentation of these trends and began to study the impact of transoceanic movements of people on the social, economic and political milieu of the Argentinean nation.³ For their part, sociologists and geographers analyzed how the migratory fluxes that accompanied the rapid processes of urbanization and industrialization affected employment rates, the public services offered by the state and the landscape of cities.⁴ Not surprisingly, the relationship that these disciplines

¹ I'm grateful to the anonymous reviewers of *Altérités*, whose feedback importantly helped to re-shape this paper and make my points clearer.

² See Brettell and Hollifield eds. (2000), Ong (1999), Kearney (2004) and Nancy (1993) for discussions on this evolving "disciplinary division of labor" (the study of the migratory phenomenon) in other parts of the world.

³ Historians were among the first scholars in Argentina who began to emphasize the importance of studying the personal and group experiences of immigrants; see for example Nancy (1993). See as well Devoto (2004) for a comprehensive analysis of the methodologies and approaches used in the historical study of migrations in Argentina.

⁴ Rey Balmaceda (1994) provides an exhaustive bibliographical compilation on immigration, colonization and "foreign communities" in Argentina. De Marco, Rey Balmaceda and Sassone (1994) also introduce a thorough and extensive analysis of the research on "foreigners" (*extranjeros*, i.e. foreign-born) in Argentina.

were forging at the time with the state strongly influenced their approaches to the study of migrations. In fact, during the second half of the 20th century, their analytical perspectives and methodologies became “hegemonic”,⁵ just as their scientific contributions were crucial to the further consolidation of the Argentinean nation-state.⁶ Since then, scholars within these disciplinary boundaries have been highly influential in the design of Argentinean public policy, in general, and in the decision-making behind the management of international migrations, in particular.⁷

Argentinean anthropologists, on the other hand, only began to study the migratory phenomenon much later on, without achieving the institutional influence necessary to impact public debate and policy design on transnational migrations. In what follows, I will delineate the evolution of the anthropological interest on the migratory phenomenon in Argentina, signaling their frustrated attempts to more actively influence attendant public debates and policy design. Moreover, I will show how anthropological interest on migrations shifted to the analysis of border dynamics in large part as a response to discourses that romanticized the Mercado Común del Sur (MERCOSUR). In the second part of this paper, I will present my own work (that of an anthropologist initially trained in Argentina)⁸ on how this integration initiative has impacted the conceptualization and management of migrations in the region, re-signifying national borders and affecting intra-regional migrants’ rights. By analyzing these issues I hope to demonstrate that Argentinean anthropologists have and should continue to make substantial contributions to the understanding of the migratory phenomenon in Argentina and the region.

Argentinean anthropology and its interest for the migratory phenomenon

Anthropological interest in “migratory issues” in Argentina can be traced back to the early 1980s, when some anthropologists began, in isolation, to study kinship and identity among some immigrant groups and their descendents, namely, among Cape Verdeans, Koreans, Japanese and Jews.⁹ Later on,

⁵ Without being monolithic or homogeneous fields, these disciplines acquired a “scientific aura” that allowed them to occupy privileged spaces in both academic and governmental institutions. Their “scientific” reputation and the “important” role they were to play in society were both well established since then.

⁶ Geographers, historians and demographers were instrumental in the re-creation of the “official and scientific” history of the nation, and their research, done many times under the financial and intellectual tutelage of the state, filled in school books and public libraries. In addition, sociologists and economists joined the bureaucratic apparatus of the state, calculating statistics, preparing censuses and writing up the reports that have depicted the nation for local and foreign audiences.

⁷ The principal public institutions and think tanks that study the migratory phenomenon and develop policies to manage it in Argentina continue to be predominately populated by sociologists, demographers, economists and statisticians. Since the late 1990s, a new group of “specialized bureaucrats” have joined in: those with studies in social planning and management. Some examples of these institutions are INDEC (Instituto Nacional de Estadísticas y Censos de la República Argentina), IDES (Instituto de Desarrollo Económico y Social), DNM (Dirección Nacional de Migraciones), CENEP (Centro de Estudios de Población) and CIEPP (Centro Interdisciplinario para el Estudio de Políticas Públicas).

⁸ Before immigrating to Canada in the end of 2001, I had begun my PhD in Anthropology at the UNLP, while teaching and working as a consultant for the Argentinean Federal Government.

⁹ At the *Universidad Nacional de La Plata*, Marta Maffia began to do research among Cape Verdeans, while, working from the IDES (*Instituto de Desarrollo Económico and Social*) and the *Museo Roca*, Daniel Bargman studied the Jewish, Mirta Bialogorski the Koreans and Isabel Laumonier the Japanese. Marta Maffia, personal communication (March 2006).

during 1990s, many of these anthropologists and their students started to examine the ethnic associations of immigrant groups who had not received much attention until then.¹⁰ It was not until the second half of the 1990s when Argentinean anthropologists developed an interest in the so-called *inmigración limítrofe* (immigration from neighboring nations),¹¹ who had become apparent in the Metropolitan Area of Buenos Aires (*GBA*).¹² Although this immigration was not new to Argentina, Bolivians, Peruvians and Paraguayans had become increasingly “visible” in the nation’s capital and its surrounding areas due to important changes in their migratory patterns.¹³ Those working on “anthropology of education”¹⁴ began to study how “diversity” (coming from a neighboring nation) was experienced among students¹⁵, the ways in which teachers interpreted and used it¹⁶ and how issues of immigration, integration and nationalism were introduced in the curricula and enacted in the classroom.¹⁷ Others examined how discourses deployed by the press excluded these immigrants¹⁸ and the role played by migratory legislation in their criminalization.¹⁹

Anthropologists working among migrants from neighboring nations paid special attention to issues of suffering, exclusion, discrimination, marginalization, stigmatization and racialization and most of their studies were conducted in the *GBA*, where the majority of these immigrants resided. Linking the concept of socio-cultural diversity to the discrimination endured by the *limítrofes*, this body of literature shed light on the processes that constructed “difference” and “the different”.²⁰ Moreover, denouncing situations of social injustice and unconstitutional practices, while proposing concrete alternatives to overcome them, these anthropologists showed that their contributions could go beyond the academia to reach the social policy arena.

¹⁰ See for example the book edited by Maffia, ed. (2002) and also Maffia, Ballina and Monkevicious (2005), who study the associations of European immigrants (excluding the French, Italian and Spanish) in Buenos Aires province as “identity territories”. The study of international migrations in Argentina had mostly focused on the Spanish, Italian and French; nationalities that had overwhelmingly dominated the scene during the period of “massive immigration” from 1880 to 1914. As a result, the literature on these three groups was vast, whereas that on other groups was scarce.

¹¹ My research has focused on South American immigrant *colectividades* (Brazilian, Chilean, Bolivian, Peruvian and Paraguayan) and their ethnic associations in La Plata (Recalde 1999a, 1999b, 2000a, 2000b).

¹² According to the INDEC (Instituto Nacional de Estadísticas y Censos) the metropolitan area of Buenos Aires or *Gran Buenos Aires (GBA)* comprises the Autonomous City of Buenos Aires and 32 *partidos* (administrative districts).

¹³ See Recalde (2006b).

¹⁴ Many of these anthropologists took part in a research project that began in 1994 at the UBA (Universidad de Buenos Aires), whose goal was to study how cultural diversity was being “used” in the neo-liberal environment of the 1990s in Argentina. See Neufeld and Thisted eds. (1999).

¹⁵ Holstein (1999).

¹⁶ Ghigino and Lorenzo (1999).

¹⁷ Novaro (1999).

¹⁸ Courtis and Santillán (1999).

¹⁹ Orlog and Vives (1999); Recalde (2006, 2008).

²⁰ A group of Argentinean sociologists working at the *Instituto de Investigaciones Gino Germani* (Faculty of Social Sciences, UBA) has studied these same issues since the 1990s, emphasizing the material consequences of the discrimination, exclusion and marginalization endured by immigrants from neighboring nations living in the *GBA*. Yet, while anthropologists’ research has been fieldwork-based and has included both Argentinean and immigrant perspectives, these sociologists have mostly employed secondary, quantitative sources (censuses, surveys, etc.) and have focused their attention on the views and attitudes of Argentineans. See Margulis, Urrersti *et al.* (1998).

Nevertheless, their attempts were unsuccessful. On the one hand, their findings did not resonate among those who had for long monopolized the design of social policy in Argentina (arguably reflecting the resistance of the well established disciplines to share their privileged institutional space). On the other, the recommendations proposed by these anthropologists did not seem to significantly contribute to promoting anthropology as a discipline that has a distinctive role to play in public debates and policy design on international migrations. In fact, anthropology continues to be perceived by most in Argentina as a discipline that belongs to the academia.²¹

The migratory issue “went to the border” for many Argentinean anthropologists in the beginning of 2000, when they shifted their attention to the study of the “historically rooted dynamics” of border areas. While some saw in this new field of inquiry the opportunity of documenting “localized cultures” that resulted from both historical processes of identity construction and contemporary re-accommodations taking place across borders,²² others highlighted the new conflicts that, arising in these areas, questioned the rhetoric of the national media and politicians.²³ Argentinean anthropologists have also emphasized the arbitrariness of political borders, making apparent the strategies historically deployed by states to consolidate their legitimacy while building their national identity.²⁴ Furthermore, others have studied the practices and discourses of public officials working at border crossings in order to ethnographically document the constant re-creation of the symbolic and material presence of the nation-state.²⁵

This renewed interest for the study of processes that take place at, across and on both sides of the border was not unique to anthropology nor did it merely reflect a creative turn of the discipline. Largely, it responded to the pervasive discourses that, particularly at the end of the 1990s and beginning of the 2000s, powerfully promoted the MERCOSUR in Argentina.²⁶ The *Mercado Común del Sur* is an initiative of regional integration that began in 1991 with the goal of creating a free-trade area in the *Cono Sur*.²⁷ While its foundational members were Argentina, Brazil, Uruguay and Paraguay, other South American nations were later incorporated – Chile (1995), Bolivia (1996) and Peru (2003). Over the years, MERCOSUR has broadened its scope to encompass the regulation of diverse social, economic and political issues, and the management of migrations has acquired particular relevance, becoming the center of agitated debates and conflictive disputes over power.

In this context, the discourses that advanced the MERCOSUR did not only materialize in the economic, political and social initiatives that bonded together (state) members, but also provided a fertile ground for the

²¹ Even if throughout the 1990s, anthropology left the classroom “to go public and private”: some anthropologists began to work as consultants for the government (I was one of them) and freelancers, as well as in private companies and in different state programs and departments.

²² Hirsh (2000).

²³ Grimson (2002), Sprandel (2000), Gordillo (2000).

²⁴ Escolar (2000), Vidal (2000), Karasik (2000).

²⁵ Badaró (2002).

²⁶ his “booming interest” in the study of border areas has become apparent in many parts of the world, where initiatives of regional integration such as the EU (European Union), NAFTA (North American Free Trade Agreement), CAN (*Comunidad Andina* or Andean Community) and ASEAN (Association of South East Asian Nations) have “re-signified” national political borders. See for example Sassen (1998), Morris (2002) and Ong (1999).

²⁷ Term employed to designate a political sub-region that includes Argentina, Uruguay, Chile, Bolivia and Paraguay and Brazil.

construction of a new object of inquiry. While some have claimed that the “formal” negotiations of this integration initiative (economic and political meetings and dialogues) have created new opportunities for pre-existent social actors (a new framework or regional background in which to strategically organize their activities),²⁸ the financial support given to scholars working on the MERCOSUR cannot be overlooked. This support has favored the development of new academic partnerships, research projects and programs with a regional scope, while increasing the exchange of researchers and students between state members. As a result, the literature on the MERCOSUR burgeoned during the 1990s. While some scholars sought to develop multidimensional and transdisciplinary approaches to both critically and comprehensively grasp the complexity of this “new social space”,²⁹ others saw in the MERCOSUR the crystallization of a “historical brotherhood” inherent to the region. Extolling the virtues of the integration initiative, the latter focused on the study of its “cultural dimension”, claiming that suitable cultural policies would bring about the region’s growth thanks to a redefinition of its nations’ collective identity.³⁰

It was in large part in reaction to both this latter literature and a series of integrationist discourses promoted by politicians and economic elites in the region (and certainly profiting from the financial resources available to those working on the MERCOSUR) that many Argentinean anthropologists considered it necessary to critically and ethnographically analyze the dynamics of borders. Thus, denouncing the romanticism of fervent promoters of the MERCOSUR, anthropologists have documented the juridical and socio-cultural construction of borders, the social and cultural relationships that are developed in them and the emergence of new forms of ethnic identification among aboriginal groups living on border areas.³¹

In the same direction, my work among migrants from neighboring nations in Argentina has criticized the perspectives that extol the virtues of the MERCOSUR while overlooking its negative consequences. Moreover, my research has progressively widened its analytical framework to better understand how the MERCOSUR has been impacting the conceptualization and management of migrations in the region – an issue that has been overlooked by scholars.³² More precisely, I have added a “regional layer” to my analysis on local and national dynamics, and moving from one dimension

²⁸ Jelin (2000).

²⁹ See for example the book edited by de Sierra (2001) which compiles a series of articles written by scholars of diverse social disciplines in the *Cono Sur*. This body of literature was a reaction to the reductionist approaches that prevailed in the beginnings of the MERCOSUR and focused on the study of its economic aspects. Numerous publications came out of research that employed the region (MERCOSUR) as their referential framework of analysis. See for example Mendioca ed. (2004) and Rozas *et al.* (2001).

³⁰ See the book edited by Recondo ed. (1998) in which he argues (along with the book’s contributors) that “...culture is the mortar that makes possible that the integration be fruitful and lasting.” (p.5). See as well Clementi ed. (1996).

³¹ See the book edited by Grimson ed. (2000) and Grimson (2002).

³² The literature that analyzes the migratory phenomenon in the MERCOSUR employing a regional framework is scarce and has focused on the institutional aspects of the integration (i.e., the bodies that have progressively been assigned the management of migrations). See Recalde (2005). As I have already mentioned, a number of scholars in the region have been working towards the development of approaches to comprehensively grasp the complexity of the “new regional social space”; yet, despite examining diverse social, political, cultural, institutional and economic issues inherent to the evolution of the MERCOSUR, the migratory phenomenon has not received their attention. See de Sierra ed. (2001). Finally, Argentinean anthropologists working on migrations have shifted their attention during the late 1990s and early 2000s to the study of border dynamics.

to another have made clear their interconnections. My fieldwork in La Plata city has allowed me to ethnographically document the harmful effects of discourses that have been disseminated by national politicians, government sympathizers and criminalized migrants from neighboring nations in Argentina in the late 1990s³³ – contradicting the rosy predictions of MERCOSUR's promoters. In addition, the analysis of the migratory legislation implemented by the Argentinean government during the 1990s, along with its use of the media to negatively portray intra-regional migration, has made apparent that the nation-state continues to have the last word when it comes to managing populations within its territory and across its borders.³⁴ Its sovereignty over both the new regional body and other transnational forces has also been demonstrated by the lack of implementation of adopted international conventions and regional agreements that protect the human rights of migrants in the MERCOSUR.³⁵

In what follows, and moving to the regional dimension of my analysis, I will delineate how the MERCOSUR has impacted the conceptualization and management of the migratory phenomenon in the region. While intra-regional migrations have emerged as “an issue that needs to be regulated by the block”, the rights and experiences of internal migrants have been harshly affected by the implementation of contradictory strategies seeking to both eliminate national borders and reinforce them. Moreover, while representatives of governments, unions and businesses in the region have taken part in these negotiations, migrants themselves have not been invited to do so.³⁶

The renewed role of political borders in the MERCOSUR and its impact on intra-regional migrants

In its beginnings, promoters of the MERCOSUR envisioned this initiative as the panacea for the region: its benefits would be multiple and, indeed, they would reach all. Wider economic liberalization would contribute to the strengthening of democracy, whereas regional development and the shrinking of the state would facilitate the protection of human rights.³⁷ Almost two decades have passed, however, and the wonders of the MERCOSUR are yet to be seen; what is worse, its fruits have not been that rosy. In fact, while the consolidation of the economic block has counterbalanced the external vulnerability of its members and improved their participation in the international market, the expansion of intra-regional trade has, at the same time, increased the dependence of the “small” members (Uruguay and Paraguay) on the “big” ones (Argentina and Brazil). Moreover, even if the MERCOSUR has promoted the strengthening of democratic and more egalitarian regimes among its members, political, economic and social asymmetries still pervade the region.³⁸ Thus, despite public enunciations promising economic development with social justice, the “social aspects” of

³³ See Recalde (2006b).

³⁴ See Recalde (2006b, 2008).

³⁵ See Recalde (2006a).

³⁶ See Recalde (2005).

³⁷ See Ministerio del Interior, Ministerio de Relaciones Exteriores and OIM (1999). This document synthesizes the discussions held at the “South American Meeting on Migrations, Integration and Development” held in Lima, on July 1999.

³⁸ See Recalde (2004).

this integration initiative have not received much attention, being merely dealt with precariously and in a reactive manner.³⁹

The development of the MECOSUR has been also accompanied by the promotion of opposing discourses on the role that political borders should play in the newly created region. Representing the interests of different influential social actors, these discourses have in turn materialized in conflicting strategies aiming to, on the one hand, progressively eliminate national borders, and, on the other, reinforce them. For the fervent promoters of intra-regional trade, national borders have been bothersome “internal frontiers” that have challenged the economic development of the block. For these groups, only the external frontiers of the MERCOSUR, the region’s borders, should be furthered in order to create a fortress that could protect regional trade while allowing for the most wanted “flow of goods and capital”. With this goal in mind, politicians and economic elites have disseminated discourses asserting that a “shared socio-cultural space”, a “regional culture” has historically developed in the region due to the “natural tendency” of MERCOSUR members to come together.⁴⁰ As if national differences and conflictive relationships had never existed between these states, this claim of “historical brotherhood” was employed to justify the consolidation of a united region without internal divisions.⁴¹ Moreover, in order to pursue this goal and determined to overcome all obstacles in the way, a set of institutional bodies was soon developed, which began to design and implement legislation to “loosen national restrictions”. It was fundamentally at this point when the movement of people in the region began to be perceived as an issue that needed to be regulated. More precisely, responding to the needs of a growing market that demanded mobile workers, negotiations started to delineate a regional migratory policy that would “free labor from national constrains.”⁴² For the promoters of this perspective, national borders should be progressively replaced by a strengthened regional frontier.

In contrast to the solid development of institutional bodies regulating the “economic side” of the MERCOSUR, the management of the migratory phenomenon has been done in a fragmented and ad-hoc manner by a series of relatively isolated bodies. The “migratory issue” has been passed around between a wide range of commissions and working groups that have only reactively dealt with it – in the absence of any coordinating entity and lacking the legislation that could enable state members to operate in a “supra-national manner.”⁴³ In this institutional and legislative context, a narrow understanding of the migratory phenomenon has prevailed, dominating regional and national policy design. Intra-regional migrations have often been associated with poverty, marginality and crime, which politicians, union leaders and members of economic elites employ to portray internal migrants as “threats” to both

³⁹ See Recalde (2005).

⁴⁰ These discourses were accompanied by their material counterparts, such as the erection of monuments, the construction of bridges and the financial support given to projects, programs and partnerships engaging different (State) members.

⁴¹ See for example Recondo ed. (1998) and Clementi ed. (1996).

⁴² See Recalde (2005). Sassen (1998) has noted this same phenomenon in other regional integration initiatives such as NAFTA (North American Free Trade Agreement), ODECA (Organization of Central American States) and the Pacto Andino (Andean Pact).

⁴³ Barretto Ghione (1999) has shown how the lack of a regime based on the “notion of supra-nationality” has limited the development of the MERCOSUR’s “social side” – the “communal integration”, which includes social, cultural and educational matters among others. He argues that this has been the case because those who created the juridical-institutional structure of the MERCOSUR only had in mind the development of a common market.

national order and identity.⁴⁴ In turn, these tainted misconceptions have materialized in immigration policies focusing on the surveillance and control of national borders. For this reason, “regional efforts” have mostly translated into the development of surveillance technologies employed at border crossings, the exchange of “official” information and the coordination of administrative procedures – all measures believed to constitute the safeguards that would protect states from the renewed external threats posed by transnational migrations. Therefore, the precarious understanding of the migratory phenomenon in the region, along with the procedures implemented to regulate it, have advanced the reinforcement of national borders in the MERCOSUR.

These two opposing ways of conceptualizing national borders and the attendant strategies deployed to enforce them, have generated a series of conflicting dynamics that have accompanied the development of this integration initiative, such as the promotion of the frontier-free market vs. the bounded welfare state and the reinforcement of frontier controls vs. the need for intra-regional mobile workers. What is more, these conflicting dynamics have notably affected the rights and experiences of migrants in the region. In particular, the fragmented and often contradictory regulations implemented to manage the movement of people in the MERCOSUR have created a gamut of migratory statuses as a result of granting different rights depending on the “type of entry” into the nation-state. The “degrees of membership” so created correspond closely to what Morris (2002) has called **system of civic stratification** whereby differential rights and protection are granted by the state to diverse “entry categories”, producing a system of stratified rights, closely associated with monitoring and control.⁴⁵

This phenomenon became apparent in Argentina, especially in the late 1990s and beginning of the 2000s, when some intraregional migrants were blamed for the economic, political and social crisis that the country was going through. As in other parts of the region, the conservative media was employed by politicians and other supporters of the government to disseminate discourses that depicted Bolivians, Paraguayans and Peruvians as criminals who had gone to Argentina to steal work from workers in need, while illegally occupying houses and overloading the public care and education systems. These xenophobic accusations were accompanied by the implementation of a series of spasmodic and contradictory presidential decrees that one day welcomed these immigrants as “South American brothers”, but then expelled them due to their “illegal” status in this nation. These unconstitutional practices were only reinforced by another undemocratic procedure: the state granted different types of tourist visas to these migrants depending on how they had entered the nation: 15 days if they had done so by land and 3 months if they had done so by plane. Moreover, once in Argentina, citizens from these nations were demanded to have a work contract right after their tourist visa had expired, which was not feasible for most since completing the necessary administrative procedures was perceived as an obscure and very expensive process that involved painfully learning how to overcome both “official” and “off the record” regulations.⁴⁶ Thus, through all these practices, the Argentinean state not only

⁴⁴ See Martini (1999) for an analysis on the role played by the media in the re-creation and dissemination of discourses that link intra-regional migrations to risk. She also shows how the media has increasingly shaped public opinion in the MERCOSUR.

⁴⁵ See Recalde (2006a).

⁴⁶ Learning how to deal with different state bureaucrats, the police and the military (at the border and in the city) was a crucial part, which usually included paying bribes and enduring abusive and humiliating behavior. Most of those I interviewed in La Plata commented having gone through this “learning process”, which has also been documented by Casaravilla (1999) and

generated “illegality” but also manipulated the presence of the Peruvians, Bolivians and Paraguayans in the nation, deepening the already precarious membership granted to them.⁴⁷

Without doubt, the consequences of this criminalization were harshly felt by many of these immigrants, whose access to public services and resources was importantly constrained. In this context, Peruvians, Paraguayans and Bolivians became the target of disdainful attitudes, abusive treatment and exploitation. While the police and other state bureaucrats abused their authority, bribing and humiliating them, most employers economically exploited their vulnerability, paying them only meager salaries and not providing them with safe working conditions. Moreover, informal, quotidian interactions with ordinary citizens were often permeated by scornful attitudes and mockery, contributing further to their marginalization. Thus, although not affecting all of them to the same degree, many of the Peruvians, Paraguayans and Bolivians in the Metropolitan Area of Buenos Aires were submerged into increasingly pauperized living conditions, lacking most public services and working in the precarious sectors of the unregulated economy.⁴⁸

Closing remarks

The invention of racist labels, the design and implementation of discriminatory legislation and the enforcement of diverse regulations seeking to control populations within the national territory and across its borders are all strategies deployed by states to define who belongs to the nation and who does not. In the MERCOSUR, this set of strategies has given rise to a gamut of migratory statuses that assigns partial membership as the result of granting different rights depending on the type of entry in the nation-state. The emerging system of civic stratification has been employed in the newly created region as a system of stratified rights closely associated with monitoring and control. This phenomenon became apparent in Argentina in the late 1990s and beginning of 2000s, when regional migrants were criminalized, deepening the already precarious membership granted to them. Moreover, the discriminatory and exploitative treatment that these migrants received not only submerged many of them into increasingly pauperized circumstances, but also affected their families and friends back home, who relied on the good luck of those who had been able to leave.

Argentinean anthropologists have made substantial and distinctive contributions to the study of transnational migrations, while proposing concrete strategies to address the conflictive issues raised by this phenomenon in Argentina during the 1990s. Alongside the evolution of the MERCOSUR and the dissemination of discourses that romanticized this integration initiative, anthropologists have shown the arbitrariness, complexity and dynamism of border areas. My own work on how the MERCOSUR has re-conceptualized national borders while affecting the lives of migrants in the region and in Argentina is part of this effort. It is an effort that seeks to contribute to the strengthening of an anthropology that has a distinctive role to play in current society, an anthropology engaged in public debate and policy design on migratory issues. In short, an engaged anthropology committed to

Grimson (1997) in other parts of the Metropolitan Area of Buenos Aires.

⁴⁷ Recalde (2008).

⁴⁸ Recalde (2006a).

social justice.

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Résumé/Abstract

En analysant l'évolution de l'intérêt anthropologique pour les migrations en Argentine, cet article explore le rôle que cette discipline peut jouer de nos jours ainsi que la mesure dans laquelle des facteurs « non académiques » peuvent influencer nos sujets de recherche. De plus, en montrant comment le MERCOSUR a modifié la signification des frontières politiques en Amérique du Sud, affectant, par conséquent, les droits et les expériences des migrants intrarégionaux, j'espère démontrer que l'anthropologie argentine a fourni et doit continuer à fournir des contributions substantielles aux débats publics et à la planification des politiques concernant les migrations transnationales.

Mots clés : MERCOSUR, frontières politiques, criminalisation des migrants, anthropologie

By examining the evolution of anthropological interest surrounding migrations in Argentina, this paper explores the role that anthropology can play in present society while signaling the degree to which "non-academic" factors shape our research interests. Moreover, showing how the MERCOSUR has re-signified political borders in South America, affecting, in turn, the rights and experiences of intra-regional migrants, I hope to demonstrate that Argentinean anthropology has and should continue to make substantial contributions to public debates and policy design on transnational migrations.

Keywords: MERCOSUR, Political Borders, Criminalization of Migrants, Anthropology

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