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New Challenges to Cross-Border Life in Ciudad Juárez-El Paso in the Context of Authoritarian Neoliberalism

Nuevos desafíos a la vida transfronteriza en Ciudad Juárez-El Paso en el contexto del neoliberalismo autoritario

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ABSTRACT

The United States is currently undergoing a demographic shift marked by the sustained growth of the Latino population, while the aging and decline of the white population coincide with the emergence of "demographobia". This phenomenon has generated controversy and prompted actions aimed at restoring the American status quo, leading to restrictions on human rights, social movements, migratory processes, and human mobility. These restrictions are accompanied by a contradictory populist rhetoric that seeks to impede the movement of people, yet does not hinder the circulation of corporations and commodities. The purpose of this article is to analyze the cross-border everyday life of the population in the Ciudad Juárez-El Paso region during the COVID-19 pandemic, through the interpretation of statistical data and a descriptive analysis of the concept of authoritarian neoliberalism. This approach enables the identification of various actions and discursive forms that have emerged in parallel with the po-

RESUMEN

Estados Unidos se encuentra en medio de un cambio demográfico marcado por el crecimiento sostenido de la población latina, mientras que el envejecimiento y la disminución de la población blanca coinciden con la emergencia de una "demografobia" que genera controversias y acciones orientadas a restablecer el statu quo norteamericano. Este proceso se traduce en restricciones a los derechos humanos, a los movimientos sociales, a los procesos migratorios y a la movilidad humana, acompañadas de una retórica populista contradictoria, que inhibe el cruce de personas, pero no así el de empresas y mercancías. El propósito del presente trabajo es analizar la cotidianidad transfronteriza de la población en la región Ciudad Juárez-El Paso durante la pandemia, mediante la interpretación de datos estadísticos y un análisis descriptivo del concepto de neoliberalismo autoritario. Ello permite identificar diversas acciones y formas discursivas que emergen como productos paralelos al ascenso político del nuevo nacionalismo

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litical rise of the new right-wing nationalism in the United States —one marked by overt racism, xenophobia, and the implementation of new border security mechanisms through legal and administrative measures. These provisions have restricted mobility between the two regions; however, rather than diminishing, cross-border practices have tended to strengthen, grounded in the customs and social ties that sustain everyday life along the border.

Keywords: authoritarian neoliberalism; cross-border life; everyday practices; Ciudad Juárez; El Paso.

de derecha en Estados Unidos, caracterizado por un racismo abierto, xenofobia y la incorporación de nuevos dispositivos de seguridad fronteriza, a través de disposiciones legales y administrativas. Estas medidas han restringido la movilidad entre ambas regiones; sin embargo, lejos de desaparecer, las prácticas transfronterizas tienden a fortalecerse a partir de las costumbres y vínculos que sostienen el entramado social cotidiano en la frontera.

Palabras clave: neoliberalismo autoritario; vida transfronteriza; cotidianidad; Ciudad Juárez; El Paso.

Introduction

Among the core issues on the domestic agenda of the United States —political, demographic, and labor-related— is the country's ongoing ethno-demographic transformation. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, Latinos currently constitute 18 percent of the total population, a figure projected to rise to nearly 30 percent by 2060 (U.S. Census Bureau, n.d.). Among the general characteristics of these migrant groups are: *1)* diversity in terms of origin, class, race, and ethnocultural composition; and *2)* the representation over time of migration flows that are uneven in their intensity. Within this framework, Canizales and Agius (2021: 62) challenge the widespread belief that "the growth of the Latino population is driven by recent immigration", noting instead that "nearly two-thirds of Latinos are U.S.-born". Added to this are high fertility rates, a decline in births among white couples, and increased migration from Central America and other parts of the continent (Morey, García, Nieri, Bruckner, & Link, 2021).

According to Bruff and Burak (2020), Biebricher (2020), Giroux (2018), and Canterbury (2019), the U.S. government's response to this demographic shift has involved the resurgence of nationalist organizations, along with a set of federal and state legal-administrative actions aimed at curbing it —such as increased funding for law enforcement and enhanced technological control along the southern border. These actions have manifested in hate campaigns, xenophobic rhetoric, and a broader fear of losing white dominance in the United States as a marker of supremacy. In this sense, the concern reflects one of the foundational

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principles of neoliberal doctrine: the association of inequality and competition for citizenship with ethno-racial composition as mechanisms through which individuals differentiate themselves, following dominant class standards. These mechanisms become tools for legitimizing social distance and radical forms of racism (Bruff, 2016).

These consequences are further intensified in border regions, particularly along the U.S.-Mexico divide, where harsh political controls over human mobility have been implemented. Extreme legal and policing mechanisms disrupt the daily life of populations residing in territories previously shaped by longstanding social practices —what is referred to as transborder life.

These recent transformations in border life —beyond demographic changes— also involve the presence of established transnational industrial corporations. These corporations contribute to the logic of population differentiation along two lines. First, there is a group of residents with productive skills and the ability to sustain a transborder daily life. They are perceived as having high mobility capacities, able to move freely across the border and reappropriate public space on both sides. Second, there is a broader group of workers with restricted mobility, previously selected based on linguistic skills, human capital, and migratory status. This segmentation seeks to support the ideal of "perfect" corporate markets (Sampedro, 2013; Beck, 2008).

Within this framework, the concept of *authoritarian neoliberalism* highlights how market logic overrides human rights, exerting control over individuals and flexibilizing their ways of life. It also reconfigures the meaning of the border, turning it into a site of fortification and segmentation —as seen in the southern United States— through socio-territorial regulatory measures and with Mexico's involvement as a "safe third country". Mobility becomes criminalized, in contradiction with human rights-based notions of citizenship, contributing to severe "migration crises" in border regions. These policies transgress the everyday lives of border populations and mark a new phase in neoliberalism after the 2007-2008 global capitalist crisis. This phase entails the reconfiguration of political regimes, parties, and governments into entities that increasingly violate individual and social freedoms under a veneer of democratic legitimacy (Saidel, 2021).

The implementation of pro-market migration policies is closely tied to anti-immigrant agendas. Since 2005, anti-immigrant discourse has gained traction among segments of the far-right U.S. population. Simultaneously, the state has reorganized into a new authoritarian capitalist order, which became especially evident during the COVID-19 health crisis with the reactivation of Title 42. However, despite these restrictive conditions and pre-existing measures against cross-border populations, new dynamics and tools have emerged among mobile populations as they adapt to the authoritarian paradigm. New patterns of response have arisen in light of the disruption of traditional life structures.

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As a central axis of this study, the research is guided by the following questions: What restrictive measures has authoritarian neoliberalism imposed on the mobility of migrant populations? How do these measures affect cross-border mobility and daily life in the Ciudad Juárez-El Paso region, particularly during the pandemic? Moreover, more broadly, in light of authoritarian mobility controls, what role did transborder life play in confronting the onslaught of authoritarian neoliberalism during this period?

In terms of structure, the study begins with a methodological overview. It then reviews the literature on authoritarian neoliberalism, focusing on the use of coercive democratic instruments to segregate migrant populations. The third section analyzes life along the border, particularly in northern Mexico, using the Ciudad Juárez-El Paso region as a case study. This region, as Martínez (1994) notes, has a unique history marked by cross-border phenomena that generate shared meanings, values, and interactions on both sides. The fourth section examines the actions taken by authoritarian neoliberalism during the migration era, especially anti-immigrant laws and efforts to curtail migration. Finally, the study presents the findings regarding how the inhabitants of Ciudad Juárez-El Paso responded to authoritarian neoliberal policies by reconfiguring transborder life during the pandemic period.

Methodological approach

Among the methodological approaches that help establish a sound research framework is the use of a descriptive-analytical analysis of statistical data, gathered from both descriptive and interpretive perspectives. This approach enables the examination of various decrees, legal frameworks, and containment policies shaping the new U.S. migration policy, while also exposing the emergence of discursive strategies aimed at rejecting populations based on their ethnic origin. These discourses translate into violent, xenophobic, classist, and racist actions targeting large sectors of the population from the Global South, and have contributed to the consolidation of a generalized "Mexicophobia" among white U.S. communities. This rhetoric, popularized by former President Donald Trump, invoked associations with drug trafficking, violence, and low human capital (Verea, 2018).

As part of the analysis of policy documents and executive orders that have disrupted daily life along the Mexico-U.S. border under the influence of authoritarian neoliberalism, two critical moments are identified. The first corresponds to a demographic shift anticipated by Huntington (2004), which was framed as a threat to national identity and used to justify the implementation of the Patriot Act following the terrorist attacks of 2001. The second moment emerged after 2009, when far-right groups gained influence within individual U.S. states, promoting increasingly harsh measures and social rejection of populations historically classified as minorities. This shift entailed the resurgence of political actions

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associated with a new nationalism and biopolitical restrictions aimed at ethnic minorities and their mobility.

Through direct engagement with residents of the cities comprising the studied transborder region —specifically, individuals with the ability to cross the border regularly, both before and during the pandemic, as well as those accessible via technological tools such as phone and video calls during the pandemic, and in-person ethnographic interactions in the post-pandemic period— evidence was collected regarding the formation of new transnational networks. These were often built upon previously established ties and were reinforced through cross-border strategies, resulting in a renewal of daily life. This renewal became the only means of sustaining transborder existence during and after the pandemic. As noted by Cisneros, Guevara, Urdánigo, and Garcés (2022), both in-person and virtual data collection techniques carry advantages, disadvantages, and limitations. However, methodological complementarity —as applied in this research— broadens access to information and facilitates more agile data collection, particularly under pandemic-related constraints.

In this regard, the integration of descriptive analysis with the interpretation of public messages on social media proved valuable. Electronic platforms, especially Facebook, served as vital channels of communication during the pandemic and thus became essential for the research process. The images collected were edited to protect user confidentiality throughout the pandemic, with data gathered at two critical moments: July 2021 and April 2022. These data capture a variety of interactions embedded in transborder life and provide insight into the extent to which social media networks have supported daily life during extraordinary circumstances. The practical application of these digital tools enabled a visualization of the transborder society and the recreation of new ways of life, despite limitations —ultimately emerging as mechanisms for maintaining continuity and routine.

Finally, the interpretation of publicly available data from online portals enabled access to key indicators of the dynamics under study. These include annual border crossing trends, detention rates, and anti-immigrant legislation passed in the states involved. The analysis of these basic statistical indicators —through contextual reasoning and interpretation— provided valuable responses to the research questions guiding this study.

The concept of authoritarian neoliberalism in the era of migration

The new phase of the United States reflects the consolidation of authoritarian neoliberalism, gradually replacing liberalism. The term, coined by Bruff (2014), centers around the 2008 economic crisis and the failures of the Obama administration (Golash, 2018), which evolved into a political and social crisis (Chacko & Jayasuriya, 2017), signaling the erosion of American ideals and values in addressing longstanding social conflicts (Handmaker, 2019).

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In this context, migrants, people of color, LGBTQ+ groups, Muslims, environmentalists, and others were identified as scapegoats for the crisis of capitalism. For example, the U.S. government enacted structural reforms aimed at containing human mobility and implemented differentiated forms of citizenship —systematically selecting individuals with higher qualifications or economically desirable capital— thus violating universal rights enshrined in international treaties protecting people in vulnerable situations (Sassen, 2020).

According to Bruff and Burak (2019), pioneers of this concept, authoritarian neoliberalism seeks to restructure the U.S. economy following the 2007 capitalist crisis by transferring debt burdens to households. This process has fueled sociopolitical disillusionment and fragmentation. Scholars such as Davies (2016) and Burak Tansel (2017) emphasize that the issue lies not in the type of policy itself, but in the undemocratic and discriminatory practices that benefit specific population segments. Niembro (2016) further argues that an authoritarian constitutionalism has taken shape, exercising power through anti-democratic mechanisms that disproportionately affect those unable to defend themselves.

The 2008 capitalist crisis forced the U.S. state into a new configuration lacking democratic legitimacy and social cohesion (Bruff, 2012). Tansel (2017) highlights how the neoliberal authoritarian state operates in tandem with the corporate sector, disregarding marginalized populations such as the central U.S. regions, rural areas, lower-middle classes, and residents of small towns. In this framework, minorities were blamed for the country's social ills, intensifying political, cultural, and social polarization. As a result, American institutions increasingly serve neoliberal economic interests, progressively distancing themselves from foundational ideals such as liberty, justice, and equality (Juego, 2018). This global competition among states for economic growth elevates the private sector as the sole engine of development, reinforcing mechanisms of privatization and capital accumulation at the expense of public goods and social programs (Clua-Losada & Ribera, 2017), as well as competitiveness and deregulation (Mavelli, 2017). These processes undermine the sustainability of fractured populations.

Tansel (2017) also refers to populations without rights under neoliberal authoritarianism, emphasizing the logic of exclusion and exploitation in service of capital accumulation. Other examples of exclusionary capital dynamics are provided by Bayón (2019), who analyzes spatial segregation driven by wealth concentration and social fragmentation along racial, ethnic, sexual, and physical lines. Wacquant (2012) argues that neoliberalism does not aim to dismantle the state, but rather to redirect it toward serving business interests, thereby restricting opportunities within a highly unequal economic order. This differentiation, according to Wacquant, is justified through appeals to individual responsibility or minimal safety nets, leading to anti-democratic disciplinary mechanisms that protect elites and markets. These arrangements produce corporatist political orders and enable forms of discursive and subjective segregation that encourage the production of "entrepreneurial subjects" within

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an unequal framework (Torres, 2021; Belloso, 2013). As a result, social asymmetries are rationalized through discourses on individual effort, further undermining the welfare state and social guarantees (Mavelli, 2017), in favor of "resilient" individuals capable of adapting to systemic change.

In this vein, the actions of authoritarian neoliberalism do not seek to address structural problems but rather to impose coercive practices that discipline, marginalize, and criminalize ethnic and racial minorities or those lacking technical skills —casting them as the core obstacle to undemocratic capitalism in service of elite interests (Burak, 2017). According to Kymlicka (2013), Burak (2017), and Isiksel (2013), economic restructuring has triggered new challenges and the dismantling of social security for individuals, reshaping employment, families, mobility, and social agency. This has ushered in what some call the "automation of society", whereby the neoliberal project continues to mold the state during global economic crises, intending to produce resilient individuals —adaptive, productive, exploitable, and disposable as sources of capital (Ryan, 2019).

Authoritarian neoliberalism thus becomes a deeply repressive entity that restricts civil liberties and introduces new forms of racialized politics (Gonzáles, 2017). As Akira and Yoshikuni (2019) suggest, it privileges the market through labor reserves and immigrant control. Pujol (2015) highlights the contradictions in portraying migrants as economic threats while simultaneously exploiting them as a flexible labor reserve. Moreover, the ongoing dismantling of the U.S. welfare state under budgetary constraints has intensified anxieties around migrant presence (Brenner & Theodore, 2005; Esping-Andersen, 2002).

These developments foster exclusionary practices while also commodifying contemporary citizenship. A neoliberal distinction emerges between "first-class" citizens (natives) and "second-class" citizens, marginalized by race and ethnicity. These distinctions are normalized in neoliberal societies, giving rise to ethno-racial supremacist groups that justify violence and discrimination as responses to the "social and racial crisis" of the state. As Dávila et al. (2014) argue, citizenship simultaneously includes and excludes, functioning as a device that reinforces social inequality and objectifies migrants as laboring bodies, productive entities, and exploitable subjects (Kymlicka, 2013). Similarly, Ipar (2008) underscores the normative, violent, and segregative dimension of rights, which are legitimized through the psychological reasoning of the majority population to preserve the status quo.

As Bauman (2000) suggests, a global hierarchy of mobility prevails today, in which undocumented immigrants are cast as exploitable objects serving the neoliberal system. Migration policies not only criminalize mobility but also inflict physical and symbolic violence on the bodies and minds of undocumented migrants (Pujol, 2015). In line with this, Pujol notes that the 1996 Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA) marked the end of welfare dependency. Anyone not formally registered became subject to criminalization.

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In sum, the consolidation of authoritarian neoliberalism in the contemporary migration era has been accompanied by virulent anti-immigrant policies, whose discursive frameworks have gained mass support. Violence has been normalized as a justifiable response, exemplified by the establishment of migrant detention centers in 2003, harsher sentencing, and family separations (including children). This punitive logic has been reinforced by increasingly militarized border control measures, such as the construction of a triple-layered border fence and proposals for a wall over 10 meters high (Clua-Losada & Ribera, 2017). The most recent consolidation of authoritarian neoliberalism in the migration sphere took place during the COVID-19 health crisis, with the reimplementation of Title 42 and the installation of barbed-wire buoys in the waters of the Rio Grande.

Transborder life in the face of authoritarian neoliberalism

Studies by Parella (2014), Tapia (2017), Alegría (2009), among others, recognize the existence of specific arrangements governing the social, economic, and labor dynamics between transborder individuals and their families on both sides of the Mexico- U.S. border. According to Ojeda (2009), families in this region may be classified as transborder without necessarily being transnational, and vice versa. In the former, territorial proximity enables participation, while in the latter, cross-border lives are organized through regular, habitual practices in socio-spatial environments created on both sides of the border. These arrangements imply varying degrees of interaction and connection, but in all cases, participation is determined by legal status —whether as nationals, residents, or Mexican-Americans.

Citizenship, as a mechanism of control and as part of the political economy, contributes to the maintenance of order within the neoliberal system. Even residency, as a legal category, can override the rights of citizenship depending on one's economic capacity —a process known as "citizenship by investment" (Reig & Norum, 2020). In this context, citizenship becomes a commodified good, fostering inequality and undermining democracy, as individual rights become negotiable. Different citizenship documents grant varying degrees of mobility to transborder individuals, which in turn determine their access to employment, consumption, education, social interaction, and more. These dimensions shape everyday transborder life and identity, defined by the scope and ease with which individuals can engage in sets of practices, relationships, and social imaginaries (Parella & Speroni, 2018).

As previously discussed, authoritarianism has reshaped states and redefined borders through the construction of conflict, legitimizing punitive, restrictive, and control-oriented actions against border societies. These measures serve as a warning to those migrating from more distant regions. That is, border inhabitants —due to their proximity— are subjected to

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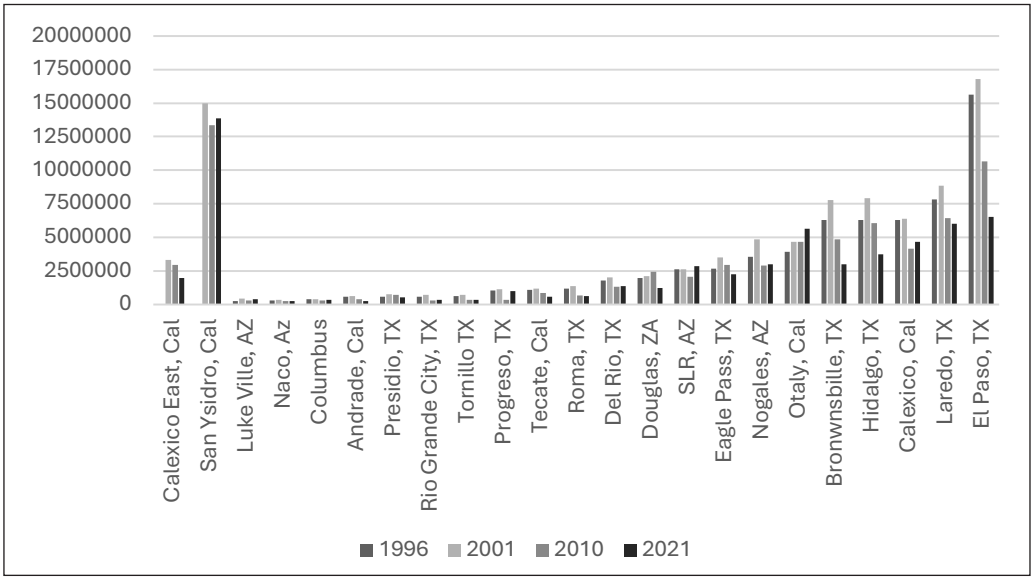
demonstrative acts of political and territorial power, functioning as deterrents for the rest of the world. This dynamic reveals a dual logic: on the one hand, the assertion of control over mobility; on the other, the strategic segmentation of individuals through bureaucratic mechanisms according to particular economic or political interests.

In this context, the northern region of Mexico and the southern region of the United States transform their geographic and demographic composition, giving rise to a system of border cities —some historically constituted, others more recent. This system includes 48 U.S. counties located in Texas, Arizona, New Mexico, and California, and 94 municipalities in Mexico belonging to the states of Baja California, Sonora, Chihuahua, Coahuila, Nuevo León, and Tamaulipas. Hernández (2020) identifies 15 "twin cities" along this border, with a combined population of approximately 13 million people. Notably, only one-third of Mexican residents in these areas have the legal ability to cross the border.

Despite these restrictions, the U.S.-Mexico border sees the highest volume of legal crossings in the world. There are 53 official ports of entry into the United States, distributed across 10 cross-border zones. Of these, 19 are pedestrian crossings, collectively accounting for the movement of approximately 13.4 million people annually (in 2019) (U.S. Department of Transportation, 2020). Figure 1 illustrates the evolution of these crossings since 1996, showing a downward trend in traffic at major border bridges.

Figure 1
Border crossings 1996, 2001, 2010, and 2021



Source: Authors' elaboration based on 2023 Port Ranking (n.d.).

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The data presented in this figure show a decline in traditional crossings, accompanied by an increase in other regions. These trends reflect the interdependence of neighboring societies that have grown intertwined across the two countries. For example, cross-border crossings through Tijuana increased due to labor-related movements (commuters), while those in Ciudad Juárez-El Paso show a marked decline after 2001 concerning non-work-related activities —coinciding with the 9/11 terrorist attacks in the United States. This event prompted the implementation of new national security and border control measures in anticipation of future threats, negatively impacting transborder society and accelerating policy changes that had long been postponed.

Mobility between these two border regions must not be understood solely in commercial, economic, or labor terms; rather, it should be viewed as an essential component of transborder life. According to the 2020 Population and Housing Census, Ciudad Juárez, Chihuahua, is the second municipality in Mexico with the highest number of foreign residents —many of whom engage in constant cross-border movement. A significant portion of this population was born in the United States but resides in Ciudad Juárez as a strategy to adapt and recover from the new exclusionary and disciplinary regimes imposed by authoritarian neoliberal governments, which have progressively restricted traditional rights through the renegotiation of origin, race, and nationality.

The decline in pedestrian crossings can be attributed to the elimination of the Border Crossing Identification Card (BCC), a document previously granted for international mobility between Mexico and the U.S. in border cities. In 1998, a decision was made to revoke the validity of this card through a modification to the Immigration and Nationality Act, 8 USC §1101(a)(6), replacing it with a biometric data card. Its implementation was initially postponed until 2001 (Public Law 105-277), and later until May 14, 2002 (Public Law 107-173). Ultimately, President George W. Bush mandated its immediate enforcement in response to the post-9/11 national emergency, effectively nullifying the BCC and abruptly stripping millions of border residents in Mexico of their legal capacity for international mobility (Salter, 2004).

Following this legal shift, the application process for a border crossing or tourist visa became significantly more demanding, requiring biometric technology, surveillance systems, and data tracking. This reconfigured migrants as participants in a market, where inclusion or exclusion was dictated by enhanced border enforcement. The U.S. took advantage of the 2001 security crisis to more selectively admit economic and intellectual capital while rejecting others. In this new paradigm, physical appearance gained relevance in determining admission, with increased discrimination based on race and skin color. Even individuals' personal histories became a critical factor. In subsequent years, additional entry requirements —often with higher financial costs— were introduced to access the U.S., segmenting foreign applicants based on biometric technologies that determined whether they were "suitable" for entry.

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The implementation of biometric surveillance technologies has sparked debate, particularly as it constitutes a violation of privacy and civil liberties. Regulatory frameworks for data use and protection remain ambiguous (Quintanilla, 2020). This legal infrastructure enabled punitive measures for minor offenses. For instance, in 2013, Form I-94 was digitized to monitor migrants' entry and exit from U.S. territory, thereby creating an electronic record to verify the accuracy of declared activities. It also served to assess economic, educational, and entrepreneurial capacity, ultimately filtering out undocumented migrants deemed "unqualified" (Oostveen, 2014).

For transborder residents, biometric surveillance at land ports of entry collects and stores increasingly detailed data about migratory mobility. It categorizes border workers and individuals with economic means and human capital as "commuters", who are electronically monitored every day at the same time as they cross the border. If their activities on U.S. soil are deemed suspicious, their immigration documents may be revoked.

Migration control laws and policies in the United States

The U.S. Immigration Code (USC), under Title 8 of the Immigration and Nationality Act (INA), enacted in 1952, contains the official federal regulatory framework concerning immigration —it is, therefore, a matter of federal jurisdiction. This legal framework is rooted in the McCarran-Walter Act, along with its subsequent amendments. For instance, the Hart-Celler Act was introduced in 1965; the Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA) in 1986; and later, the Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act (IIRIRA) in 1996 (García, 2018).

Following the enactment of IRCA, many Mexican nationals obtained immigration documents that regularized their legal status, though in lower proportions compared to other immigrant groups (Imaz, 2006). For example, only 21.8 % of immigrants who achieved naturalization were of Mexican origin, compared to 50.4 % from other groups (Pintor & Rocha, 2021). Nonetheless, these naturalizations transformed the patterns and temporality of migration: the previous model of circular migration gradually shifted toward more permanent settlement. This also produced significant changes in both the economic and political spheres, particularly regarding the influence migrants exerted on their communities of origin (Imaz, 2006).

In the early 1990s, border control in southern Mexico became a decisive issue for U.S. border policy, the National Immigration Forum Backgrounder (NIFB, 2010). During the Clinton administration (1993-2001), border control measures were reinforced, with a strategic focus on preventing entry into the country rather than deporting undocumented migrants. Later, under pressure related to the renegotiation of the Free Trade Agreement be-

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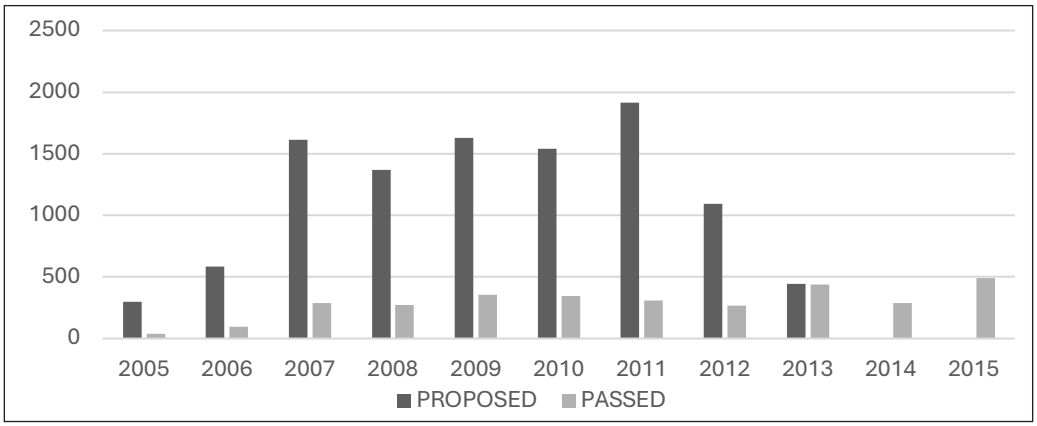
tween Mexico, the United States, and Canada (USMCA), Mexico was designated a "safe third country". Despite some resistance, migration policies were imposed by the White House (Pintor & Rocha, 2021). In this regard, Franco and Barojas (2019) highlight a sharp increase in deportations during the early months of President López Obrador's administration, from 5 717 expulsions in December 2018 to nearly triple that amount —14 970— by April 2019.

In the wake of the 2001 terrorist attacks, stricter measures were introduced to control the border, aimed at enhancing surveillance and halting unauthorized entry —particularly along the Mexico-U.S. border. In 2002, the U.S. Department of Homeland Security (DHS) assumed responsibility for national border security through the Customs and Border Protection agency (CBP), which in 2003 evolved into Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE). This agency regularly conducts deportation raids targeting non-criminal individuals through expedited mass hearings, often leading to removals via voluntary departure (Pintor & Rocha, 2021).

The steady intensification of coercive migration control practices aimed at restricting human mobility has led to the introduction of numerous legislative proposals in recent years, many of which have sought to criminalize those who cross the border (see Figure 2). At the state level, new laws began to emerge in 2008 in response to the presidential victory of Barack Obama —perceived by some as favoring undocumented migrant populations (Durand, 2013). Among the most controversial of these laws are SB1070, SB203, SB1308, SB1309, and SB1405, all passed in the state of Arizona, which has become a leader in advancing anti-immigrant legislation.

Figure 2
Anti-immigrant laws proposed and passed in the United States



Source: Authors' elaboration based on data from the National Conference at State Legislatures (NCSL, 2022).

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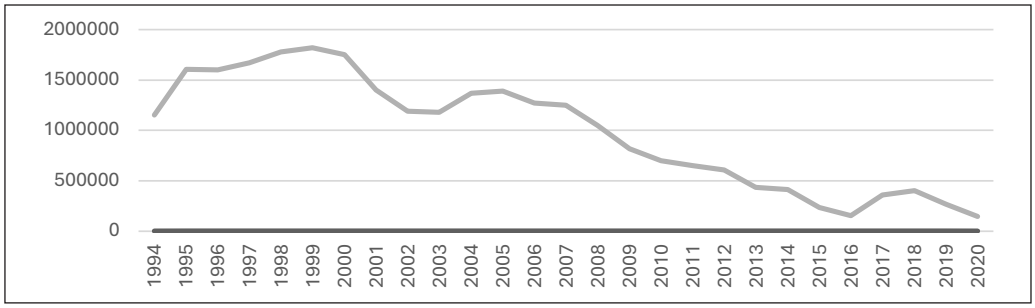
In a comparative analysis of recent U.S. administrations, data from the DHS indicate that George H. W. Bush (1989-1993) deported 4.1 million undocumented individuals, Bill Clinton (1993-2001) deported 12.3 million, George W. Bush (2001-2009) deported 10.3 million, and Barack Obama (2009-2012) deported approximately 3.2 million (Meza, 2014). Although the total number of undocumented migrants has declined over time (see Figure 3), current migration control measures remain controversial in their methods for sustaining such figures.

Figure 3
Total deportations from the United States, 1994-2020



Source: Authors' elaboration with estimates based on ICE Statistics, U.S., Department of Homeland Security (2022).

The data reveal a stark contrast between the administrations of Donald Trump and Barack Obama. While Trump's rhetoric and continuous threats may have suggested more aggressive deportation practices, this was not fully reflected in policy outcomes. Pintor and Rocha (2021) note that the total number of deportations during Trump's term was lower than under Obama, although the severity of legal consequences for undocumented populations increased. The U.S. judicial system increasingly considers immigrants eligible for deportation even if they have committed minor administrative violations —now classified as serious offenses.

The supposed neoliberal model, which once promised the "de-bordering" of nations, has effectively collapsed under the tightening of surveillance and international mobility controls —marking a further rupture from the liberal ideal of freedom. While it once seemed that free markets had displaced nation-states, new forms of state prominence have emerged, particularly in the realm of border security. This shift has been intensified by terrorist attacks in the U.S. and Europe, as well as by fears surrounding the increase in Central American migration and mass displacement in Europe due to conflicts in the Middle East. Torre and Calva (2021) identify an enduring strategy of immigration criminalization, linked to increased border militarization and a rise in removals. Currently, both unauthorized crossings and undocumented residence within the U.S. are considered serious criminal offenses (Stumpf,

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2006). These policies aim to deter undocumented mobility through the threat of punishment and often result in the obstruction of family reunification.

During Donald Trump's administration, Executive Orders 13767, 13768, and 13780 were issued under the "Zero Tolerance" policy framework. Title X was reformed, and Obama's Deferred Action for Parents of Americans and Lawful Permanent Residents (DAPA) program was rescinded. Senate Bill S.354 was introduced to restrict immigrant employability. The so-called "Trumpist" period raised border surveillance and control to a matter of national security priority. The U.S. government increased funding for border enforcement agencies and expanded the number of personnel. Currently, over 65 000 officers —including Border Patrol and CBP agents— are tasked with border enforcement. CBP defines itself as the world's largest border control organization, and for fiscal year 2023, it received a budget of $17.5 billion (U.S. Department of Homeland Security, 2023). In addition to significant investment in security infrastructure to contain large migrant caravans, there has been a rise in expedited trials and deportation orders.

Keck and Clua Losada (2022) interpret the construction of a border wall between the United States and Mexico as primarily rhetorical. Although the project remains unfinished, it deepens and reinforces the disciplinary logic —both political and economic— imposed on border populations. It fosters the perception that remaining in Mexico is the safer option. This latent effect has continued under Joe Biden, albeit with different rhetoric; yet the policies remain aligned with authoritarian neoliberal logic.

The gradual decline of anti-immigrant legislation in Arizona has been offset by a shift in enforcement toward the state of Texas. In 2017, the Texas Senate approved Senate Bill 4, which prohibited sanctuary cities in the state —until then, a mechanism of protection for undocumented migrants. This change increased federal law enforcement's involvement in immigration policing. That same year, President Trump signed Executive Order 13768, which sought to withhold federal funding from sanctuary cities, although the order was later declared unconstitutional (Federal Register, 2017). Nevertheless, the passage of SB4 led to the termination of such funding and required ICE to detain individuals suspected of being undocumented, in order to verify their legal status (Texas Capitol, 2016).

Another example of restrictive policy is Florida's recent Senate Bill 1718, which resembles Texas's SB4. Both are symptomatic of a persistent trend toward anti-immigrant legislation at both federal and state levels, revealing the near-total absence of constitutionally grounded, progressive regulatory mechanisms. While the IRCA of 1996 once represented such an effort, the global COVID-19 crisis has intensified authoritarian tendencies as the dominant framework for regulating both neoliberal economic models and human mobility. Abrupt new restrictions on immigrant mobility and residence were introduced. One such measure was the closure of borders in March 2020 for over 24 months, through the reimplementation of Title 42 (U.S. Code Section 265, enacted in 1944) —a public health provision repurposed to

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justify limitations on asylum (Becket, Viaud, Heisler, & Mukherjee, 2022). The reopening of border crossings later required new documentation and bureaucratic processes, severely affecting the continuity of daily transborder life.

Transborder life under the authoritarian neoliberal regime during the pandemic

In the late 19th century, Ciudad Juárez experienced a significant demographic boom, largely due to increased demand for labor along the U.S. southern border driven by railroad development. The city became a reception hub for cheap, unskilled labor (González, 2007). The historical trajectory of this border city reflects ongoing waves of migration from other parts of Mexico (Staines, 2008), as well as the presence of U.S. residents, who together have sustained a shared, historically embedded way of life along the border. Mobility between border cities has long been a daily occurrence, shaped by frequent exchanges and consumption on both sides, eventually becoming a traditional practice among residents (Martínez, 1982; Álvarez, 1995). For residents of Juárez and El Paso, the purchase of electronics, clothing, footwear, and other goods served to complement and reinforce a binational cultural identity rooted primarily in Mexican traditions —affecting language, customs, consumer practices, and cuisine. These symbolic and material exchanges have long shaped a shared sense of co-dependence, persisting even in the face of mobility restrictions.

The pandemic period, beginning in March 2020, abruptly interrupted and, for many, significantly limited transborder mobility in this region due to the closure of borders to non-essential travel, implemented in response to the rapid spread of COVID-19 (Pintor & Bojórquez, 2021). For nearly 20 months, individuals who routinely crossed for everyday purposes were prevented from doing so (Lara & García, 2021). Many transborder workers lost their jobs, lost access to goods and services, and were cut off from physical contact with family members. Once again, social and economic hierarchies were reinforced: U.S. citizens, residents, students, legal employees, and diplomats were allowed to cross freely, while ordinary individuals were denied entry.

Following the public health emergency, the reopening of the southern U.S. border introduced new bureaucratic hurdles, with an emphasis on health security to prevent further outbreaks. Entry was conditioned on negative COVID-19 tests meeting specific criteria, as well as proof of vaccination —also subject to particular requirements. These measures disproportionately affected Central Americans and were enforced with clear economic, ideological, and social biases. The most vulnerable groups were hit hardest, unable to resume their regular transborder lives. The lack of coordination between the twin cities further disrupted employment and economic stability —most notably in Ciudad Juárez. On the U.S. side, while the absence of transborder commuters affected consumer indicators and raised

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the cost of temporary (often undocumented) labor, cross-border movement was never interrupted for extended periods. This asymmetry laid bare a fundamentally unequal and disproportionate reality.

In response, segments of the resilient transborder population adapted and organized new forms of integration and employment. In the commercial sector, virtual platforms became essential for U.S. citizens and residents in both Ciudad Juárez and El Paso. The reconfiguration of transborder activities enabled a group of individuals to act as commercial intermediaries. Through social media, they offered courier services, personal shopping, and cross-border trade to those unable to cross due to health-related restrictions —or, more precisely, due to their exclusion based on citizenship status.

Among the new forms of economic activity, one particularly notable example was the rise of informal entrepreneurs who carried out tasks for a fee. These included transporting items to family or acquaintances, completing paperwork, making payments or deposits, and buying or selling goods. The operational logic worked as follows: the individual would announce their travel plans in advance via their personal profile or within a local social media group, offer their services, and, if necessary, arrange a pre-meeting with clients —or in some cases, complete the entire transaction virtually (see Figure 4).

Figure 4
Advertisement from a commissioned merchant

Source: Ventas En El Paso, Texas. (n.d.).

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Because transborder students were categorized as essential travelers, some of them engaged in the kinds of commercial activities described above. For younger students or children who needed to attend school daily, the situation was more complicated. Many parents or guardians only held tourist visas, which allowed them to cross the border under normal conditions. However, lacking U.S. citizenship or permanent residency, they were denied international entry during the health emergency. This created significant disruptions in daily life during the pandemic period.

The community reorganized in response. A few families were able to hire cross-border school transport services, which picked up children at border checkpoints and drove them to school and back (see Figure 5). Some parents with U.S. citizenship volunteered to accompany unaccompanied children to school. In other cases, parents relied on a relative or acquaintance living on the northern side of the border to take responsibility for their child's commute.

Figure 5
Advertisement for cross-border school transportation service

Source: BorderBus (2020).

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Another urgent activity that enabled individuals to cross into the United States during the pandemic was related to healthcare. For example, women with scheduled appointments or pre-paid maternity service contracts arranged prior to the border closure were able to justify their entry. The collected evidence indicates that *midwives* issued official letters for their Mexican clients (see Figure 6); these documents were often delivered electronically, although in some cases the midwives brought physical copies with them into Mexican territory. Some clients reported that their midwives had to cross the border to conduct prenatal medical visits during the pregnancy. These practices were considered extraordinary under the prevailing health restrictions.

Figure 6
Application for an international crossing permit for maternity services

March 24, 2020

To Whom It May Concern:

[redacted] is a client of Maternidad La Luz. She is due to deliver approximately April 9 to May 14, 2020. Please allow her to cross the border. She is receiving essential medical care at Maternidad La Luz. She should not be in the United States for longer than six hours postpartum. Maternidad La Luz is a private birth center not associated with any public or private hospital. The staff midwives at Maternidad La Luz are licensed by the Texas Department of Licensing and Regulation. Maternidad La Luz does not receive any U. S. government funding. Clients assume full financial responsibility for care received at Maternidad La Luz and are expected to pay in full one month prior to due date. Please call us at (915) 532-5895 if you have any questions. We appreciate your assistance in this matter.

Sincerely,

Patricia C Gimler LM
Patricia Conner Gimler, LM Staff Midwife

TX 96115
License Number

1308 MAGOFFIN AVE. EL PASO, TEXAS 79901 (915) 532-5895 FAX (915) 532-7127
academic@maternidadlaluz.com

Source: Authors' document.

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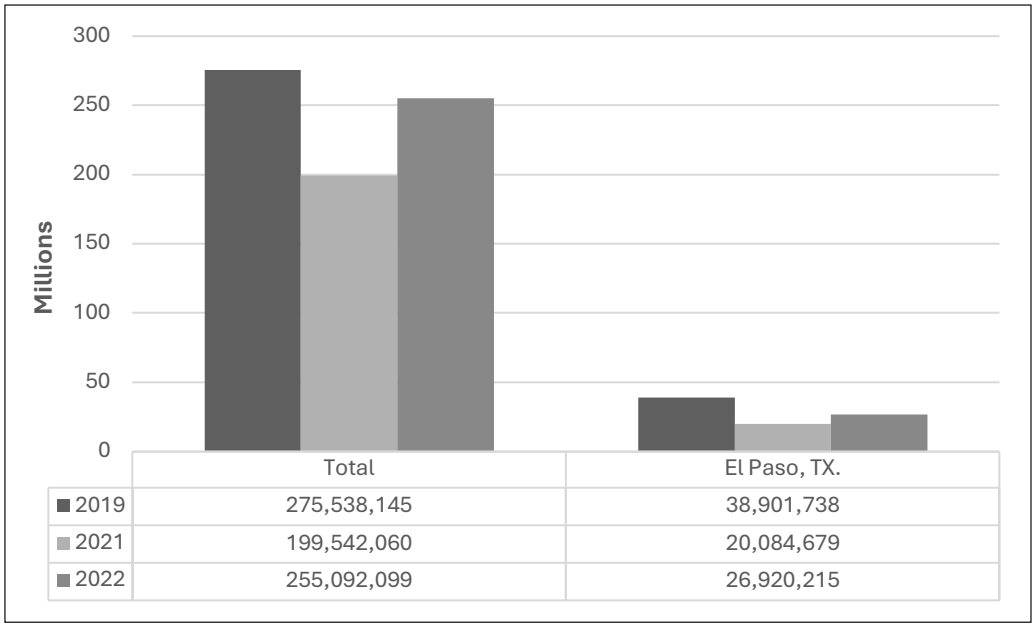
Nevertheless, these are only a few examples of transborder activities that were disrupted and reorganized due to control mechanisms that clearly limited transborder residents' rights through citizenship-based segmentation —affecting the population as a whole. In response, resilient strategies emerged that went beyond individual or family-level adaptations, aiming instead to maintain a connection with the broader transborder community and space, as had been the case prior to the pandemic. Digital platforms and communication technologies played a crucial role, enabling some individuals to preserve their jobs, maintain contact with loved ones, or access goods and services through intermediaries.

Although the border was reopened in late 2021, transborder life did not return to its previous state. On the one hand, new modes of contact limited physical movement; on the other, newly imposed travel requirements impacted overall mobility volumes in the region (see Figure 6). According to the Bureau of Transportation Statistics (2023), international mobility in the region has not returned to pre-pandemic levels. By the end of 2022, the number of international crossings had only reached 69.20 % of those registered in 2019, prior to the health crisis.

Figure 7
Mexico-United States and Ciudad Juárez-El Paso border crossings, 2019-2022



	Total	El Paso, TX.
2019	275,538,145	38,901,738
2021	199,542,060	20,084,679
2022	255,092,099	26,920,215

These hard data demonstrate the negative impact on transborder physical contact and mobility during and after the pandemic. At the same time, they highlight the emergence of new

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transborder networks as a substitute or solution to the mobility restrictions imposed on the population —perhaps even confirming the broader thesis that the daily activities of border inhabitants have continued through newly developed forms of linkage and adaptation. In other words, resilience, as conceptualized by Evans and Reids (2016), helps individuals to make necessary adjustments in the face of adversity by adopting new modes of contact and transborder practice. For this reason, the number of international crossings remains lower than expected, even after the border reopened.

The examples of transborder practices that developed during the pandemic help illuminate two key insights. First, citizenship functions as a control mechanism that differentiates individual rights while also excluding broader groups. Therefore, the historical construction of this social space must be understood as a means of accessing transborder life. Through lived experience, local inhabitants learned specific modes of being that reflect an interconnected border life. Second, transnational practices —both before and after the pandemic— enabled people to organize and sustain their social ties. The motivation of transborder residents in the Ciudad Juárez–El Paso region led them to transcend traditional mobility practices, transforming social life despite legal challenges that restrict the free exercise of everyday activities.

Daily transborder activities during the pandemic underwent a significant reconfiguration of their transnational practices. Individuals and families developed new strategies of adaptation, enabling broader forms of social connection with transnational communities and spaces through digital platforms, complementing pre-existing routines. In this sense, the everyday nature of transborder practices allowed for the reorganization of transnational society, challenging the political and economic interests of the authoritarian state and ultra-conservative groups.

Conclusion

The concept of authoritarian neoliberalism contributes meaningfully to both contemporary academic debates and public discourse. As a term, it helps elucidate several underlying phenomena. In the field of migration studies, it proves especially useful for describing state-led strategies of population segregation. Moreover, it sheds light on the role of public policy designers by highlighting a new modernity characterized by processes of stigmatization, exclusion, and the segregation of individuals based on ethnicity, nationality, or social class —thereby reinforcing regimes through ostensibly democratizing exercises.

Understanding the current migration context poses a significant challenge in a socioeconomically unequal world of the 21st century, where new nationalisms have reemerged under the dominance of the Western capitalist system. In strict terms, the 2007 capitalist crisis reconfigured the prioritization of commodities and goods over human mobility. This

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shift has generated new consumer cultures and sustained individualism, trends, messaging, religious diversity, and other dynamics —each a product of the capitalist system in crisis. These are further reinforced by emerging subjective cultural patterns among vulnerable populations, implicitly linked to the erosion of social welfare systems. From this, rejection of the foreigner arises, driven not only by material scarcity but by the stigma imposed by the prevailing economic doctrine.

The dismantling of international political action over the past decades —particularly concerning border control and state security— reveals an authoritarian model that reorients state behavior toward market prioritization. In this framework, borders are mobilized as resources by the authoritarian neoliberal system to co-opt, coerce, or manufacture consensus among subaltern groups by positioning them against newly constructed enemies of the nation. This strategy intensifies ethno-racial measures not only at the border but also across the national territory, where state restrictions are implemented to uphold corporate-friendly policies such as social spending cuts and welfare retrenchment. Simultaneously, it enables the scapegoating of migrants for societal issues, while activating authoritarian, xenophobic, exclusionary, and segregationist mechanisms.

Transborder life has thus become a continuous process of learning and readaptation, shaped by the need to respond to frequently imposed legal and health-related regulations. Evidence from the region demonstrates how populations revived transborder practices and ties between Ciudad Juárez, Chihuahua, and El Paso, Texas, during and after the COVID-19 emergency. These communities displayed historically rooted responses to adversity —such as border closures and the denial of their rights— by developing new forms of transnational empowerment. These actions may be interpreted as efforts to safeguard their longstanding transborder trajectories, emphasizing bottom-up social integration.

What emerges is an adaptive convergence of social, cultural, educational, and economic dynamics among people engaging in transborder practices —aimed at preserving everyday life through sustained interaction across different periods. In particular, this was evident in response to the restrictive measures imposed by the authoritarian neoliberal state. At the same time, these dynamics reflect the tension inherent in the social relations of the region's inhabitants, including the rise of new forms of sociability facilitated by digital technologies and economic integration. All of this occurs amid the continual reinforcement and segmentation of the border, carried out in such a way as to maintain market stability.

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