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# Border Control (Brazil, Paraguay, Argentina) and Local Inventiveness in Times of COVID-19

Regina Coeli Machado e Silva <sup>i</sup>  
Adriana Dorfman <sup>ii</sup>

*Local level effects of closing borders between Argentina, Paraguay and Brazil in order to confront COVID-19 disarticulated modes of existence of border dwellers, generating local protests for reopening, creating “sanitary refugees”, deepening the trends of biotechnological controls and sophisticating smuggling. Data for this essay was obtained from local online newspapers and analyzed with help of anthropological and geographical experiences at the border, concentrating on the description of border life and on its changes due to the sudden closure. The essay shows that the complex control structures at these borders gained a centrality whose effects were, besides stifling the pandemic, dismantling and rearticulating border practices, evidently in favor of more control. A disregard of cross-border integration, circulation and communication demonstrates the underlying reification of borders between these three national states.*

## Introduction

For residents of border cities among Argentina, Brazil and Paraguay, governments' decision to blockade passages due to the COVID-19 pandemic was, and still is, an unacceptable policy response. Border dwellers were perplexed to see the abrupt interruption of a routine of incessant traffic. In this essay, we argue that the closure with different levels of border control and integration between these countries, broke a pre-existing transborder territoriality characterized by intense modes of circulation and communication. By submitting the same (border) actors to a closure, the blockade intensified border materialization and triggered a dynamic that put illegality at the forefront, as well as interrupted different types of transit-related activities between borders. The purpose of this paper is to present an overview of these three borders, before and after the blockade motivated by COVID-19.



<sup>i</sup> **Regina Coeli Machado e Silva**, visiting professor at UNILA (Federal University for Latin American Integration), senior professor at Unioeste (Western Parana State University), researcher at CNPq (National Council for Scientific and Technological Development). <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0874-8086> contact: [coeli.machado@yahoo.com.br](mailto:coeli.machado@yahoo.com.br)

<sup>ii</sup> **Adriana Dorfman**, associate professor at the Department of Geography and tenured professor at the Graduate Program in Geography at the Universidade Federal do Rio Grande do Sul. <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6318-4546> contact: [adriana.dorfman@ufrgs.br](mailto:adriana.dorfman@ufrgs.br)



The use of the expression “Triple Border” to describe the urban conglomerate around the Iguazu Waterfalls is subject to discussion. This phrase entered circulation in the beginning of the 1990s. It denotes the securitization of border transits, after terrorist attacks against Jewish targets in Argentina were connected, according to the United States Central Intelligence Agency, to the border region. This connection was never proven (Silva 2008). As observed by Dorfman through content analysis of the bibliography on the region, authors choose to call this region “Triple Border” when discussing violence, sexual exploitation, smuggling, and related themes under scrutiny from third parties. At the same time, works that deal with social dynamics explained from local points of view (in themes such as population mobility, health, education) tend to employ the city names “Ciudad del Este”, “Foz do Iguacu” and “Puerto Iguazu” or simply “border region” (Dorfman 2019). Thus, the choice made in this essay to avoid the securitized caricature of this region implied by the expression Triple Border.

Data for this report was obtained from local newspapers, unstructured ethnographic observations by one of the authors residing on the Brazilian side, and analytical perspectives from previous research in the areas of Geography and Anthropology, though not made explicit.

The essay develops in four sections. Following this introduction, the second section shows levels of

integration and control among the three borders. The third section presents effects of the quasi-simultaneous closure among them, and the fourth brings brief final considerations.

### Integration, Control, and Circulation Before COVID-19

The territorial delimitation among Argentina, Paraguay and Brazil began in the Spanish and Portuguese colonization period and its recent configuration dates to late the 19th century. Boundary settings between Brazil and Argentina occurred in the contiguous spaces of forested land around the waterfalls of Iguazu River. Between Brazil and Paraguay, governments have built together a huge hydroelectric plant called Itaipu Binacional, damming Paraná River to serve as a potential energy reserve. Energy production, agribusiness (livestock, soybeans and other grains), tourism (Iguazu Falls) and trade (legal and illegal) are activities that characterize the interactions on this border. The economic development attracted many migrants from different parts of Brazil, Argentina and Paraguay, leading to population growth and to the foundation of several cities during the 20th Century, such as Foz do Iguacu, Santa Teresinha do Iguacu, São Miguel do Iguacu (all in Brazil), Ciudad del Este, Hernandarias and Presidente Franco (in Paraguay) and Puerto Iguazu (in Argentina) (Figure 1).

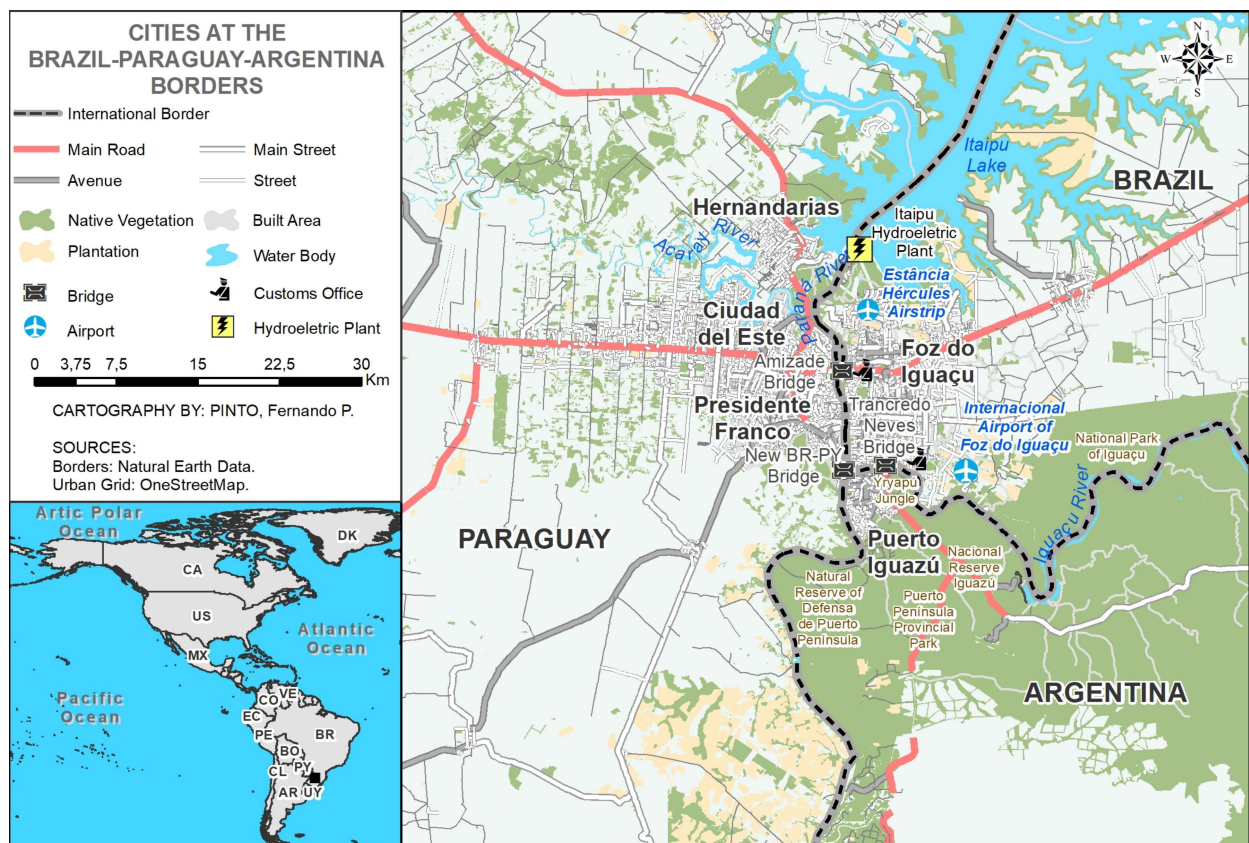


Figure 1. Map of cities at the Brazil-Paraguay-Argentina border.

An ostensive and random control of the cross-border movement of people and goods characterized traffic among the border cities Ciudad del Este, Paraguay, Foz do Iguazu, Brazil (connected by Amizade [Friendship] bridge) and Puerto Iguazu, Argentina (connected by Tancredo Neves bridge to Foz do Iguazu, 14 kilometres from Amizade Bridge).

Customs and migration controls differed on each side of the border.<sup>1</sup> From the point of view of the passersby and in relation to the entrance to Argentina, border crossing was under a rigorous control of immigration and customs officials. Entrances and exits were strictly observed. No tourist or dweller could arrive in the Argentine border city Puerto Iguazu without a passport or identity documents. A permit would be issued for the city, and a 90-day visa for other places in Argentina. Vehicles could be subject to baggage inspection at random.

On the crossing to Ciudad del Este (Paraguay) officers carried out sporadic and apparently less rigorous checks on people and vehicles. However, the constant gaze of customs officers meant uninterrupted surveillance without verification of documents and records, intensified by the presence of young army soldiers enacting the country's military power and defence.

Regarding the entrance to Foz do Iguazu (Brazil) from neighbouring countries, customs officials' control was restricted to providing entry permits to foreigners and tourists, while border dwellers moved freely. In fact, the passers were the ones who addressed border guards and asked for permits, knowing they needed papers to enter the neighbouring country beyond the city limits. By the end of 2019, Brazilian customs authorities installed Fronteira Tech, an 'intelligent' electronic surveillance system based on facial and license-plate recognition that issues alerts and generates data to fight crimes such as smuggling drugs and firearms (Portal da Cidade 2019).

The border with Paraguay is one of the busiest in Brazil. Data from 2017 reported that daily crossing averaged more than 40,000 pedestrians and almost 5000 vehicles (Quadra 2017b). At least 85 percent of that total referred to Brazilians crossing to and from Ciudad del Este to buy cheaper electronics, perfumes, clothes, alcoholic beverages, and other commodities (Meireles 2018).<sup>2</sup> This vigorous trading is eased by porters of large bulks (sometimes above the permitted quota of US\$ 500) or of illegal goods (cigarettes, drugs, medicines, etc.). Hundreds of border workers, known as *laranjas* (oranges), or porters, live by these practices. They are not occasional buyers, like most, and are often unaware of who hires them to pass the goods.

Iguazu Falls and commerce in Ciudad del Este make the three borders a lively tourist destination that entails the need for services. Many Brazilians cross the border

daily to Ciudad del Este as employees or trade owners. In the opposite direction, many Paraguayans cross over to Foz do Iguazu, to work in construction, in the urban service sector, or as domestic workers. The transit of students to higher education institutions, especially medical schools (Portal da Cidade 2020a), is also important in Ciudad del Este and Presidente Franco (Paraguay), with students coming from all over Brazil. Many live in Foz do Iguazu and commute using public transport.

In addition, there is the transportation of cargo such as soybeans, wheat, and rice from Paraguay and Argentina for consumption in Brazil or, in Paraguay's case, for export through Brazilian ports. In the opposite direction, industrialized products are carried to Paraguay for domestic and personal use. The intense traffic of Brazilian and Paraguayan border dwellers to Puerto Iguazu also aims at purchasing Argentine wine and meat.

In the border cities of the three countries, there is an everyday feel of conviviality in streets, shops and restaurants, a hospitality made up of goodwill amid anxieties brought about by differences and border controls.

## **Ingenuity and Local Rearticulations After COVID-19 Border Closures**

In March 2020, national governments enforced abrupt, uncoordinated and unilateral closures, with radical consequences for customs, immigration and sanitary controls. The dormant control architecture was activated and had an impact on residents' daily experiences. The borders between the three countries remain closed at the time of writing this report. Brazil's government has an inarticulate and ineffective policy in the internal control of COVID-19, so border closure seems justified. By interrupting the everyday conviviality and the bustling flow of people, it amplified the constitutive tensions of national borders, shown as follows.

**A. Uncompromising border control.** The closure of bridges with iron bars blocked the pedestrian crossing, while the traffic remained open for cargo, as seen in the live transmission shared 24/7 through local media (**Figure 2**). Drivers go through immigration, customs and sanitary control.

There was a significant inversion of the movement registered in Brazilian immigration: before the pandemic, the average number of registered tourists, foreigners and nationals coming from Argentina was 3000 per day, now it is reduced to 20 (under special authorization). Coming from Paraguay, the mean number rose from eight or ten to 300 per day, mainly Paraguayans. Noteworthy are the entries of citizens from neighbouring countries into Brazil for humanitarian reasons

(often undergoing health treatment in Foz do Iguacu or other big cities in Brazil). Also, citizens from other countries, being in Paraguay or Argentina, use the Brazilian border to return to their countries through Foz do Iguacu airport. Requests for these moves are made to the countries’ consular services and directly to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Brazil, which issues permits to be presented to border immigration officials. Border control between Brazil and Paraguay made by Fronteira Tech has been updated to recognize passersby.

**B. New categories for human mobility.** Explicit enforcement of legal and political regulations linked to national sovereignty brought into play categories previously unusual in the region. The use of the category “illegal immigrants” by the Brazilian Federal Highway Police for workers who try to cross the border in covert

ways can be illustrated by the seizure of a truck, at the sanitary barrier, whose driver and two occupants, Paraguayans, were trying to enter Brazil with goods. They were “deported to Paraguay” and accused in Brazil of violating a sanitary measure (Portal da Cidade, 2020b). Towards Paraguay, border dwellers (Brazilian shop owners in Paraguay) tried to cross the Paraná River on speedboats and were also sued for violating the border-crossing ban (Benetta 2020).

As Argentina and Paraguay closed borders to their nationals as well, tensions concentrated on the Brazilian side. Unable to return to their countries or to enter Brazil again, Argentines and Paraguayans remained “in between borders” for up to a week-long period. One of the Argentines summed up this situation with astonishment: “we are homelandless” (Rodrigues 2020). Under the title “Exiled by the Pandemic, Paraguayans

are Sleeping Rough on the Border” a newspaper piece described a “legion of workers” with their families, who left São Paulo, Brazil, for Foz do Iguacu, where they would cross the border on foot. After registering their departure from Brazil, they faced bars preventing them from entering their own country. Those who were unable to find shelter waited for days, crammed on the 550-metre-long Amizade Bridge, sleeping rough, without food or healthcare (Figure 3). They received “voluntary help from Paraguayan Navy officers responsible for local surveillance, and from groups of Brazilian volunteers” (Paro 2020). The blockade created the figure of “sanitary refugees” (Junqueira 2020), a concept used by Brazilian diplomats to describe this distressing situation of Argentines and Paraguayans temporarily trapped in between borders.



Figure 2. Heavy truck traffic on Amizade Bridge. Screenshot, *Portal da Cidade* broadcast, July 24, 2020. <https://foz.portaldacidade.com/cameras-ao-vivo/ponte-da-amizade-sentido-paraguai>

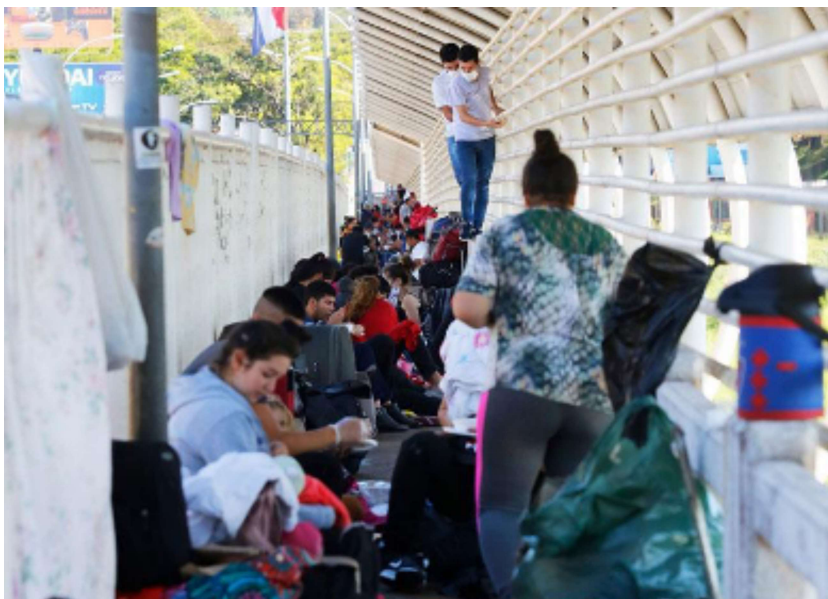


Figure 3. Paraguayans trapped on Amizade Bridge. Photo: H2Foz, May 20, 2020.

**C. Intensification, diversification and new routes for illegal transit of goods.**

Brazilian Federal Revenue “registered impressive numbers in the first four months of 2020”: cigarette smuggling from Paraguay increased by 800 percent when compared to 2019, as did drug trafficking (Calebe 2020a). Seizures of goods, either from smugglers, tourists’ shopping or resellers decreased on bridges and increased far from official checkpoints, such as on the Paraná River, on Itaipu Lake, in hiding places and on side roads. Besides cigarettes, large amounts of marijuana and wine (Calebe 2020c)

and cellphones and accessories were seized. Increased smuggling apprehensions, mainly of marijuana, occurred in Argentina and Paraguay (Benetta 2020b). Towards Paraguay, on the Brazilian side, foodstuffs (sugar, eggs, oil and cold cuts) were also seized (Calebe 2020d). Smuggling has also become more sophisticated. Drones and remotely controlled electric boats started crossing Paraná River (Quadra 2020c), occasionally seized by the Brazilian Navy (Calebe 2020e).

**D. Protests and border rearrangements.** The pandemic has radically altered the lives of people within the cross-border region. About 100,000 workers in all sectors, living on one side of the border and working on the other or in the crossway, have lost their jobs. Neighbouring cities like Ciudad de Este and Foz do Iguacu have discussed local proposals for the gradual reopening of the Amizade bridge with sanitary measures, such as the creation of a joint health safety protocol and temporary authorization to cross the border using a "health ID". This "ID", valid for four-to-five days, contained test results for COVID-19 and allowed restricted and controlled circulation (Calebe 2020b).

After two months of closure, hundreds of workers and entrepreneurs in tourism, commerce, and cross-border transport in Brazil protested in favor of reopening border bridges. Other demonstrations took place in Ciudad del Este and Puerto Iguazu (Calebe 2020f). In one of them, participants were called "smugglers" by the authorities (Quadra 2017a).

Mayors from four border cities in Paraguay also met, in an unprecedented way, to ask central government to "conscientiously open" borders. Their border economies were based "95% in commercial activity and tourism, and for this reason, the closure of borders and restrictions on free movement break the economic cycle of these municipalities, with immediate effect on businesses, companies and production units, generating closures and massive layoffs and raising unemployment and poverty rates" (Benetta 2020c).

## Final Considerations

Changes in border management due to COVID-19 exposed constitutive tensions inherent in the collective experience across borders and caused, in the same movement, complementary reactions. After six months, an important tension is the heavy-handed interruption of normal life in face of the successive and unsuccessful rearrangements attempted by authorities, businesspeople, travel agents, and residents, mainly between Paraguay and Brazil, trying to soften the abrupt closure of borders. At the same time, collective demonstrations took place in the three border cities, demanding national governments' attention to crises generated by the breakdown of territorial and

socioeconomic integration. If in previous times there was little immigration control (except for Argentina), since COVID-19, there is extreme state control over the flow of people across borders by means of consular services and diplomatic representations, individualizing permits through procedures on the national level, controlled at physical barriers at border crossing points. As a correlate, new figures emerged in between borders, such as sanitary refugees, and along with new local vocabulary to describe the movement of border dwellers between nation-states as "illegal immigrants". The border closure also increased sophistication of smuggling as circumventing stricter surveillance and control of passage increased illicit profits.

Undoubtedly, the inflexible closure of the passage imposed by the three state governments to control COVID-19 highlighted the separation function of the border. Until then, the border between Foz do Iguacu, Ciudad del Este and Puerto Iguazu was experienced through the intense transit of people and of material and immaterial goods, made more noticeable due to its recent drastic interruption and to the multiplication of control structures. With separation at center stage, border practices were dismantled and reassembled following local knowledge and needs, under the watchful eyes of the national states, reflected in the introduction of external categories such as "illegal migrants" and "refugees" and in the increase of apprehension of smuggling.<sup>3</sup>

## Notes

- 1 For more details of the institutional structures of control in Argentina, Paraguay and Brazil, see Dorfman, França & Felix (forthcoming).
- 2 This intense trade was induced by the economic cooperation agreement that opened Brazilian ports to Paraguay, signed in 1973, negotiated at the time of the construction of Itaipu hydroelectric plant
- 3 Essay translated by Walkiria Sidi, PhD in Applied Linguistics at Universidade Federal do Rio Grande do Sul.

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