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Articles

Trade, politics and everyday life in a Latin American cross-border region: the case of Corumbá/Puerto Suárez/Puerto Quijarro (Brazil/Bolivia)

Comercio, política y cotidianeidades en una región transfronteriza latinoamericana: el caso de Corumbá/Puerto Suárez/Puerto Quijarro (Brasil/Bolivia)

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Abstract

Latin American cross-border regions are multidimensional and multiscalar. They are influenced by structuring factors —economy, politics, daily life, identities and environment— that collide in themselves and with each other, and generate overdeterminations. The article highlights the strong incidence of everyday factors, to the same extent that there are no post-nationalist projects, nor accumulation strategies that use borders as resources. This article analyzes from this perspective a cross-border region that serves as a hinge between the two main economic zones of Brazil and Bolivia and is articulated around the cities of Corumbá (Brazil), and Puerto Quijarro and Puerto Suárez (Bolivia). The article concludes by proposing a series of heuristic questions related to the characteristics of the actors and the prospects of new governance modalities. The article is based on a fieldwork and the review of existing documents and literature on the subject carried out from 2023 to 2024.

Keywords: Latin America, borders, cross-border regions, cross-borders urban complex.

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Resumen

Las regiones transfronterizas latinoamericanas son multidimensionales y multiescalares. En ellas inciden factores estructurantes —la economía, la política, las cotidianeidades, las identidades y el medioambiente— que colisionan en sí mismos y entre sí, y generan sobredeterminaciones. El artículo resalta la fuerte incidencia de los factores de la cotidianeidad, en la misma medida en que aquí no existen proyectos políticos postnacionalistas, ni estrategias de acumulación que usen a las fronteras como recursos. Se analiza desde esta óptica una región transfronteriza que enlaza a las dos principales zonas económicas de Brasil y Bolivia y se articula en torno a las ciudades de Corumbá del lado brasileño, y Puerto Quijarro/Puerto Suárez en Bolivia. Se concluye con algunas invitaciones heurísticas relacionadas con las características de los agentes y las perspectivas de nuevas modalidades de gobernanza. Se basa en un estudio de campo, así como en la revisión documental y de la bibliografía existente llevada a cabo de 2023 a 2024.

Palabras clave: América Latina, fronteras, regiones transfronterizas, complejos urbanos transfronterizos.

Introduction

Every cross-border territory is an algebraic sum of contradictory interactions. To the same extent that these territories amalgamate from different "structuring principles of socio-spatial relations"—a suggestive proposal by Jessop et al. (2008, p. 397) regarding regional constructions in contemporary capitalism—so do the agreements that cover and support them. In them, the structuring factors—political, economic, symbolic, identity, environmental or simply emanating from the social practices of daily life—interact, collide and eventually, some of them, play an overdetermining role, imposing their organizing logic on the rest.

This overdetermination can lead to relatively stabilized systems (for example, economic overdetermination on the United States-Mexico border with its impressive manufacturing plants, trade corridors and economic treaties; or the case of the European Union, where a post-nationalist political project imposes its logic, not without surprises, on the rest of the factors). This does not omit that they are systemic condensations of flows and relations based on conflict, as is always the case in these cross-border regions. Nonetheless, they are distinguished by high levels of institutionalization that are not found in Latin American transboundary regions (RTFs; Spanish acronym for: *regiones transfronterizas*).

As Sohn (2018) and Dilla et al. (2022) have stated, accumulation projects on the American continent that use the cross-border environment as a spatial resource of capitalist valorization are unusual. Similarly, policies that perceive borders as mere scars of history are also uncommon. Rather, cross-border regions and their harmonization processes reside in and develop from "social relations of reproduction" (Lefebvre, 2013, p. 92).

Consequently, cross-border territories become zones of socialization of values, norms and "systems of habit and custom" that allow "individuals" to operate successfully in the heterogeneous and hierarchical scenarios in which their lives develop. Nevertheless, they also imply overcoming those systems of habit and custom and pre-existing

partnerships (Heller, 1987). This is an overdetermination from the relations of daily life, less discernible at first sight to the same extent that invisibility becomes a condition of their own existence (Dilla Alfonso & Chávez, 2023).

This study attempts to advance in the discussion of this situation in a Latin American cross-border region—structured around the Brazilian cities of Corumbá and Ladário and the Bolivian cities of Puerto Quijarro and Puerto Suárez—and, from there, to suggest a series of heuristic proposals that could encourage future studies on the subject.

This paper is organized as follows. The first section explains the theoretical framework and the difference between the binational dimension—embodied in the trade corridor that connects the São Paulo and Santa Cruz economies—and the cross-border dimension that deals with the relations and flows that decisively involve local communities and actors. Although both spaces are constituted from connected agential roles of diverse actors and communities, they are presented and, in fact, operate as overlaps of structuring factors and territorialities. From this argumentation, the paper then presents a synthetic vision of the cities that make up this cross-border region, their histories, asymmetrical relationships and an analysis of the formal institutional gaps and the existence of a sort of surreptitious politics in which public decisions are made by non-state social bodies based on "systems of habit and custom" (Heller, 1987).

The subsequent section, which is more extensive, deals with the commercial dimensions and their effects on the cross-border region and its cities. It develops some analyses of the spaces of exchanges and socialization known as the free fairs of Corumbá, one of the most relevant topics of the article. Finally, some conclusions are drawn, emphasizing a series of aspects that may constitute heuristic motivations for future research: the nature of governance that can be generated as a result, the specific role of women and Indigenous people, and the contentious nature of these processes.

For this study, research was carried out, the first step of which was the critical review of the academic records focused on the area and of the printed documentation. Probably due to the prominence of Corumbá in Brazilian border studies—a well-attended biennial international meeting of specialized studies is held there—this area has aroused academic interest. As a result, several studies have been produced. These studies include Ferraro (2020), Da Costa (2013, 2020), Oliveira and Esselin (2015), Batista da Silva (2013), Espírito Santo et al. (2017), Hernández Hernández and Loureiro Ferreira (2017), and numerous master's theses by students of the border relations course at the headquarters of the Federal University of Mato Grosso do Sul in Corumbá, such as those by Guerrero (2020), Loio (2018) and Maicon (2018). These works, generally focused on geography or anthropology, provided valuable information to introduce the subject and will be occasionally cited throughout this paper.

Several days of fieldwork were carried out to complement this information, including observations of some activities, such as trade fairs and some businesses that rely on cross-border dynamics, both in Puerto Quijarro and Corumbá. Finally, unstructured interviews were conducted with 15 people related to these areas, constituting the most important part of the information collected. These included cultural activists, traders and municipal and decentralized government officials based in Corumbá and Puerto Suárez. The interviews were preceded by informed consents in which the interviewees could decide if and how they would be quoted in the article.

The overdetermination of daily life in Latin American cross-border regions

The economic structuring of most Latin American cross-border regions is based on short value chains. These are fundamentally carried out within the same local space that summarizes the "structured coherence of the political economy" (Harvey, 2014, p. 348), with very limited spaces for accumulation, which has been called "self-contained regions" by other authors (Dilla et al., 2022). When a binational economic corridor crosses a border, its design operates in the logic of the boundary as a "non-place", a hindrance that should be overcome as quickly as possible and with very limited collateral effects on border societies. The "open regionalism" approach prevails in Latin American integrationist projects, as discussed by Iranzo and Caballero (2020).

At the same time, the harmonization processes that make their functioning viable operate below the radar of formal politics, whose actor par excellence, the State, is absent in certain areas or is a "stone guest" that legitimizes what it cannot regulate. This does not mean that Latin American cross-border consultations are apolitical, especially when politics is referred to the accumulation of contradictory interactions between social groups for the control and allocation of resources and values that can be channeled both institutionally and through a myriad of social practices that shape daily life (Dilla Alfonso & Contreras Vera, 2021).

Regarded in this way, cross-border consultations can constitute collective actions, as defined by Tarrow (1997), whose contentious content can be expressed in the face of diverse social power relations, but especially in the face of the nationalist frameworks that limit the cross-border relations from which they are carried out. Politics, filtered through daily life, results in an interplay of diffuse powers, as Agnew (2018, p. 146) defined: "... a power not centered or directly commanded, but resulting from patterns of social associations and interactions in groups and movements". It operates not only as low politics—closely following Peña (2015)—but as surreptitious politics, which transpires outside formality, sometimes transgressing its obstructive norms and whose success lies precisely in its public discretion and opacity (Dilla et al., 2024).

This study proposes to discuss this situation from a case study in a RTF shared by Brazil and Bolivia structured around a cross-border urban complex that encompasses four cities: Corumbá and Ladário[1] in Brazil, and Puerto Suárez and Puerto Quijarro in Bolivia.

This region contains the most important commercial passage between the two countries and a border port of transit for Bolivian goods seeking the Atlantic or Brazilian goods heading to the Pacific.

This region is the territorial hinge that connects the two most dynamic economic zones of both countries: São Paulo in Brazil and Santa Cruz de la Sierra in Bolivia.

[1] Ladário and Corumbá constitute a conurbation unit. There are no socio-spatial differences between them, not even concerning cross-border processes. Therefore, Corumbá will henceforth be referred to as a single urban unit that includes Ladário.

These can move along both a terrestrial road network (highways and railroads) and the river complex around the Paraguay River so that several ports of this nature accompany the commercial activity. This is called a binational corridor, as Dilla et al. (2022) discussed: the most limited mode of cross-border regionalization with limited effects on the territory in which it operates.

Nevertheless, at the same time, and without fundamental relations with the extensive binational traffic, economic processes of little or no accumulation occur in the region that are vital for the reproduction of family life, as well as other social and ludic-cultural practices that animate a sociologically very dynamic region and a complex identity framework.[2]

Both spaces constitute borders, but they refer to different situations. Binational spatiality refers to the relationship between two nations that control—or attempt to control—trade and human mobility through decentralized institutions with minimal local involvement. On the other hand, social practices distinctively involve local and community actors and account for the different relationships that determine the systemic character of the cross-border region.

The binational level is modeled on flows of different scales. Above all, the cross-border level distinguishes itself as a creator of places without which it cannot exist. In the economic field, binational relations are sections of an accumulation that occurs outside their own places, in the economic centers. On the other hand, cross-border relations usually generate what Fraser and Jaeggi (2018, p. 24) called "distribution markets" that take place locally, with less economic impact but with high social impact. Nevertheless, both dimensions coexist and feed back on each other, giving rise to what Haesbaert (2019, p. 254) calls "agglomerated territories... confusing mixtures of zone-territories and network-territories, where it becomes very difficult to identify a coherent logic or a spatially well-defined cartography".

This reality suggests a configuration of power relations similar to what Agnew and Oslander (2010, p. 193) identified as situations of "overlapping territorialities" in which "... the intersection of sources of territorial authority, different from the authority of the nation-state, with that of states" occurs. In this case, it is a space of flows that facilitates binational trade or the access of goods from each party to the global economy, whose institutional framework—no matter its shortcomings—is supported both by binational legislation and agreements and by the rules issued by supranational regional bodies, such as the Southern Common Market (Mercosur, Spanish acronym for *Mercado Común del Sur*), and global ones, in particular the World Trade Organization (WTO).

On the other hand, communities develop many links on the margins of the precarious spaces of formal politics and generate places where daily life is reproduced. It

[2] This strategic location, benefiting from an effective road system, makes this zone a corridor for criminal trafficking—drugs, arms, people—as well as for smuggling of high volumes of merchandise with international connotations. Obviously, this affects local associations in different ways, but there is no doubt that local associations have a sufficient and distinctive dynamic outside these forms of traffic, with commercial practices that certainly involve illegality legitimized by the imperative of survival. This is usual in the way the inhabitants consider their legal transgressions lawful, which implies a political economy, a social relationship, and an ethic different from the one that reigns in the criminal world. It is the latter that is of interest and is developed in this study.
For a discussion on legality and lawfulness in the production of daily lives, see Abrahams and Van Schendel (2005). Concerning Latin American borderlands, Ceballos Medina and Ardila Calderón (2015) and Renoldi (2013) are suggested.

is, finally, a conflict-ridden intersection, but it does not imply separations of norms and organizations. Dissident territorialities from the nationalist and state-centric order ultimately operate "encapsulated in a given state" (Agnew & Oslander, 2010, p. 196) so that even when they operate with "different social premises" and collide accordingly, they are not mutually exclusive (Blatter, 2003).

The formation of a cross-border region and a peculiar urban complex that serves as its axis are visible data of local sociology. Both parties have established diverse relationships that include economic, demographic and cultural links, albeit with a discreet formal political presence that imbues all cross-border processes with notable informality. As noted, this last fact situates daily life relations as a structuring factor of the first order.

Beyond the possible inter-state agreements or accumulation strategies that are to be found in the region, cross-border territoriality is organized from numerous practices of socialization of values, norms, and "systems of habit and custom" that allow "individuals" to operate successfully in the heterogeneous and hierarchical settings in which they live (Heller, 1987). It is not possible to understand this RTF without paying attention to the multiple "organizing practices of space" (De Certeau, 2008, p. 3) from civil society.

This problem constitutes the main thrust of this study. Even though its observations can be transferred to different fields—social, cultural, political—and are treated in a very preliminary way, this analysis focuses on the economic field that originates from cross-border relations as defined above and takes shape in the so-called *free fairs* that take place every day at some point in the Brazilian city of Corumbá with the majority attendance of Bolivian merchants. These fairs constitute spaces of socialization and, eventually—as will be seen—of collective actions, yet also of conflicts that reveal the inequalities underlying this RTF.

Three cities on a border

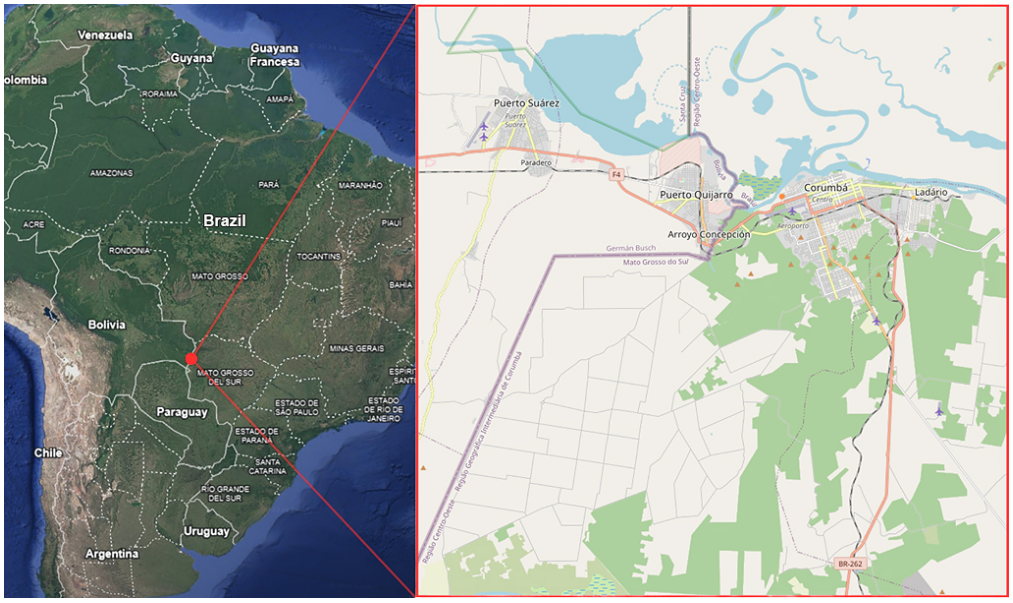
Although both indigenous peoples and Europeans roamed the Pantanal—a tri-national wetland considered one of the largest and most biodiverse ecosystems on the planet (Fundo Mundial para a Natureza, 2021)—for many centuries, the first historically documented settlement was the Brazilian city of Corumbá. It was founded at the end of the 18th century as a frontier stronghold in two senses: as a "civilizing", cattle-raising and agricultural frontier against the immensity of the Pantanal, whose indigenous population was ignored, and for the interest of this study, as an affirmation of Portuguese sovereignty in the face of the Spanish empire (Da Veiga Silva & Tedeschi, 2022).

Consequently, for nearly a century, Corumbá was the only significant population center in the region until the end of the 19th century, when the town of Puerto Suárez was founded on the other side of the border, as the first geopolitical manifestation of the Bolivian state in the region (Da Costa, 2020; see Figure 1).

Both settlements experienced modest growth caused by agricultural and mining production in their regional environments and, although in the first half of the twentieth century their contacts were limited by the lack of a consistent road system, in the 1950s they became hinges of a nascent commercial corridor that linked the richest regions of each country: Santa Cruz de la Sierra in Bolivia and São Paulo in Brazil

(Oliveira & Esselin, 2015, pp. 131-132). The recent history of this region and the cross-border urban complex that organizes it cannot be understood without addressing this corridor's ups and downs (infrastructural, economic, environmental and political).

Figure 1. **Map of Corumba-Ladario (Brazil) and Puerto Suárez-Puerto Quijarro (Bolivia)**



Source: created by the authors based on images from Google Earth

An example of this is the fate of the Bolivian city of Puerto Suarez. It was founded at the end of the 19th century and was intended as an affirmation of Bolivia's sovereignty in the area, as well as a location for Bolivia's access to the Paraguay River through the Cáceres Lagoon, whose water level allowed the navigation of medium draft ships (Alves, 1984). However, as the 20th century progressed, the lagoon was affected by adverse factors until it was no longer navigable. This sealed the fate of Puerto Suárez, which remained a place of discreet historical heritage, as evidenced in its squares and buildings of modest construction, but with a certain touch of decorative elegance that the lack of maintenance and painting has not been able to erase.

Puerto Suárez did not withdraw into a vacuum. Its place as a commercial hinge was gradually occupied by a new town called Puerto Quijarro, which boasted an enviable location next to the same border and adjacent to the passage of a railroad that entered Brazilian territory from Santa Cruz (Da Costa, 2013; Oliveira & Esselin, 2015). Puerto Quijarro was recognized as a municipality in the last decade of the 20th century and benefited from the migration of hundreds of families from the altiplano, which led to its being classified as one of the Bolivian localities with the highest population growth rate.

Unlike Puerto Suarez, there are no signs of spatial planning here. The town's irregular layout, lacking squares or other public spaces, reveals urban improvisation. Instead, it is home to intense commercial activity in numerous small establishments clustered around the border crossing, in a neighborhood called Arroyo Concepción,

and in a so-called Chinese Mall—a one-story building with an area of approximately one hectare filled with small stores—which has Brazilian shoppers as its most frequent visitors.

Oliveira and Esselin have identified this process with the emergence of a new border territoriality, "a process of new signs of integration, interaction, rebellion and conflict" (Oliveira & Esselin, 2015, p. 153) where functionality is superimposed on formality. These cities have become interconnected pieces in a very complex economic and identity game, one of the main reasons for which is undoubtedly the inequality between the parties. This is exactly what Barajas Escamilla has discussed as situations of "asymmetric and complex interdependence... determined by the power of the actors and their institutions" (Barajas Escamilla, 2013, p. 43) and which imply different levels of sensitivity and vulnerability to relational changes.

Corumbá is, by Brazilian standards, a poor municipality, with more than 40% of its population classified in that condition, which was about ten points above the occurrence of poverty at the national level (Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatistica, 2022). Nevertheless, the situation on the Bolivian side was even more precarious, as can be inferred from the always imprecise national statistics that mentioned a poverty rate of 60% and about one fifth of the population considered destitute (Gobierno Municipal de Puerto Suárez, 2001; Fundación para la Conservación del Boque Chiquitano & Humus, 2001).

Ferraro (2020) has added other indicators that denote the welfare gap within the RTF: while 84% of Brazilian households benefited from a garbage collection system, only 31% of Puerto Suarez and 68% of Puerto Quijarro had this basic sanitation service. Whereas less than 20% of Brazilians were self-employed, more than 40% of Bolivians were in the same condition; especially in Puerto Quijarro, 50% were self-employed, and 43% were in commercial services. Not surprisingly, Bolivians perceived Corumbá as an opportunity for survival, either by residing in the city or by working there as seasonal workers.

This situation explains the demographic trend in the RTF, which is typical in these regions. Corumbá has experienced modest annual growth (around 1%) since the 1980s and an absolute decrease in the last decade. The 2022 census reported 123 000 inhabitants, including several thousand foreign immigrants, mainly Bolivians.

Puerto Quijarro and Puerto Suarez only reported a population of 36 000 inhabitants in 2012 (the year of the last census) but with high growth rates of 3.6% per year (Oliveira & Esselin, 2015). In other words, Corumbá, poorer than the Brazilian national average, was unattractive to its national surroundings but very attractive to the Bolivian population, particularly to the impoverished inhabitants of the altiplano who comprise the bulk of the population of the commercial pontoon of Puerto Quijarro.

Whether based in Puerto Suárez or Puerto Quijarro, this population earns a living by crossing the border. However, some live permanently or intermittently in Corumbá, where they live in the poorest sections of the peripheral neighborhoods, as in the symptomatically named *Nueva Corumbá*. There is no record of the size of this Bolivian population living in Corumbá.

In conversations with academics and officials, there was a generalized estimate of approximately 8 000 Bolivian immigrants. However, the very nature of human mobility in the area casts a shroud of uncertainty over any calculation. This is largely due to the virtual absence of restrictions on the transit of people in the immediate cross-border

area[3] and to the relative flexibility of Brazilian regulations, which allow an initial period of regularization upon presentation of some easily acquired documents.[4]

Bolivians have become an inseparable part of Corumbá's urban landscape, particularly in the emerging peripheral neighborhoods and in the world of small commerce. However, for all of them, this meant painful itineraries that some could not bear. Male and especially female Bolivians have been the key pieces of countless cross-border relationships manifested in diverse daily life fields in both cities, particularly in the dominant center, Corumbá.

The incomplete puzzle of the cross-border relationship

The state agencies of both countries establish links that may be motivated by international agreements, particularly binational ones, or by pressing needs, for example, in security matters. Although the relevance of these links for border governance is recognized, it is reiterated that they do not constitute fundamental legal processes of the transboundary space itself (that which directly involves the local communities, as mentioned above). Even the formal political institutions that should be part of this local regulation—and consequently of the maturation of cross-border governance—the municipalities do not intervene directly in these processes.

In the interviews conducted with city mayors or other municipal officials, there was almost exact agreement both on the issues they considered priorities in regional relations and on the difficulties in promoting agreements. Firstly, both parties considered cooperation in health and hygiene as the fundamental issue, even though the Bolivians referred the matter to access to Brazilian public health systems—which they only achieved in case of emergencies—while the Brazilians emphasized measures in environmental sanitation and the management of communicable diseases.

Similarly, both agreed on developing measures to improve trade flows and educational and cultural activities. However, both mentioned the difficulties they encountered as a major issue. According to the mayor of Puerto Suarez, he had met twice with the prefect of Corumbá. However, due to the high level of centralization and lack of prerogatives, they dealt with protocol issues and in return he had never been able to invite the mayor of Corumbá:

[3] Brazilian permissiveness only applies to the border strip closest to the border, as established in the Roboré agreement (1954) between Presidents Kubitschek and Siles Suazo, and other agreements adopted within the framework of Mercosur. Just a few kilometers from Corumbá, on the road leading to the city of Campo Grande (departmental capital), vehicles are carefully inspected and their passengers scrutinized, particularly when their phenotypes suggest Bolivian origin. In order to continue the trip, a visa is required, established within the framework of the integrationist agreements to which both countries are party.

[4] Brazilians also cross into Puerto Quijarro and Puerto Suarez, but rarely settle in Bolivia. According to the interviews, there are three reasons for crossing: The first is to buy Bolivian goods, which are cheaper and more varied, especially in the so-called Chinese Mall. The second is to study at a private medical university, which provides degrees recognized in Bolivia, and after a process of accreditation, also in Brazil, for relatively discreet payments. Finally, the participation of Corumbanenses in festivals and religious celebrations in Bolivia is also important.

> (...) We must recognize that there is a bit of bureaucracy in how the Bolivian State is managed, right? The fact that we are not, let's say, a federal state, and we can determine our regulations, let's say, regarding international relations, as, I imagine, Mato Grosso del Sur does, and as all the border states do, right? In Bolivia there is a lot of talk about municipal autonomies, right? And in fact, it's been reflected more in the responsibility that the municipality has than in the management of its resources, right? We can't talk about autonomy if we don't manage resources, right? If we don't have control of certain decisions, let's say, obviously how it's managed... It has already been discussed several times, there are several aspects that they will be able to break down. There's the issue of the Roboré treaty. Yes. There is the issue of the twin cities, too, right? But right now, there's nothing. (M. M, personal communication, September 26, 2023)

In turn, a high-ranking official of the Corumbá prefecture stressed that, despite the existence of a federal regime in Brazil, there are no municipal prerogatives to relate with counterparts beyond the border. Although this official acknowledged that there had been some informal contacts in emergencies, as happened with the closing of the borders during the COVID-19 pandemic, "there is no permanent or systematic dialogue" (R. J., personal communication, September 27, 2023). Thus, it can be concluded that transboundary issues are dealt with not only in the context of "low politics", but also of "surreptitious politics".

This formal institutional vacuum is filled by civil associations and informal structures that satisfy the requirements of cross-border activities. Although this study focuses on cross-border trade, specifically the so-called free fairs, it is worth making a digression to illustrate a similar form of behavior in fields of relations of different natures, in this case, in the religious-ludic-cultural field.

Corumbá, Puerto Quijarro and Puerto Suárez are communities with high levels of religious spirituality. Therefore, it is possible to identify a wide variety of faiths with their respective festivities. People of both nationalities participate in these celebrations, in some cases because of their attachment to their faith and in others for recreational reasons. Nevertheless, probably no religious festivity can rival the one parishioners dedicate in August to the Virgin of Urkupiña, one of the most important figures in the Bolivian religious pantheon and considered the patron saint of Bolivia's national integration.

The expansion of this festivity has been marked by a gradual transition from the private to the public space, which in this region is expressed in festive sharing. The Bolivian merchants themselves finance these activities through the contribution of musical bands and dance troupes from Santa Cruz and Cochabamba, and, just as important, they offer free drinks and food to the public.[5]

[5] A woman interviewed described what happened last August 24: "... in the street there was a truck full of Skol beer, with two freezers, and there they were handing it out: 'give me a beer', and they would give you a beer... Only financed by the merchants here in Corumbá, from Bolivia, Bolivians, and the party takes place on the street" (M. L B, personal communication, September 23, 2023).

Despite the significance of these celebrations, the municipal authorities only intervene peripherally, approving the routes and taking care of public order. Instead, they constitute a stage from which new leaders appear. Each year, the congregation chooses a "godfather", usually a merchant with enough money to pay for several days of celebrations in squares and clubs. This sometimes involves whitewashing public images tainted with the usual shady dealings at any border. According to some activists interviewed, the celebration of the Virgin of Urkupiña has allowed a sector of the population discriminated against in Brazil to confront stigmas—"they believed that Bolivians are always dirt" (A. A, personal communication, September 25, 2023)—thus achieving "the confirmation of their identity here, 'I am here, I am also part of this side'" (M. L B, personal communication, September 23, 2023).

International and cross-border trade

The most visible aspect of the cross-border region formed by these cities and their hinterlands is a dynamic commercial logistics apparatus (Hoffman, 2000; Rodrigue et al., 2006) through which 90% of the trade between Brazil and Bolivia is transported, stored, inspected and eventually transshipped, particularly that of the two most important economic zones of their respective countries: Santa Cruz de la Sierra in Bolivia and São Paulo in Brazil. At the same time, the region is a transit point for other overland traffic from both countries in search of oceanic outlets or third-country markets. According to Batista da Silva (2013), this meant the passage of USD 5 581 million annually. Slightly less than half of this total comprised Bolivian gas (88% of bilateral trade), and the rest comprised various products, mainly commodities.

According to data collected at Brazilian customs, in 2023, between 210 and 270 commercial vehicles transited this border daily, which implied approximately USD 1.5 billion, including goods transported by train. Other goods transported by waterways or gas pipelines should be added, multiplying several times the above-mentioned value. Many of these goods transited and stopped at a dry port run by the Agesa company, one of the most important in southern Brazil, where dozens of local workers were employed.

By its nature and formal processing, this was a typical binational corridor. These corridors generally cross borders without social or cultural effects and even with very limited economic impact. This corridor is no exception. Its passage through this zone has generated its own infrastructure, which, in addition to the aforementioned roads, includes dry dock areas (where large trucks wait their turns for inspections that will allow them to pass in one direction or another), automotive workshops, and other facilities that provide services to the drivers. The customs service operates under the integrated control system and works around the clock to clear the hundreds of trucks that cross daily.

These transfers provide the region with benefits and negative externalities. In the former, they generate jobs (formal and informal, direct and indirect), create greater

extra-regional connectivity, and lead to the installation of technologies and qualified personnel. In the latter, the negative environmental effect on the cities and the impact on roads is well known, as it frequently causes vehicle congestion that dry ports cannot mitigate.

Beyond this cost-benefit calculation, what is important to emphasize is that this is an international corridor regulated by a migration, customs and sanitary control system, governed by international trade provisions, Mercosur rules, and bilateral economic agreements and, therefore, whose existence is independent of the quality of the local partnerships that accompany it.

This corridor—and its entire control and management apparatus—operates as an enclave tangentially linked to local partnerships and their cross-border dynamics. It constitutes a layer of state formality that seeks to control—although only to a limited extent—binational flows of goods for which the border is a "non-place", a hindrance that should be overcome in the shortest possible time. It is exactly the type of "open regionalism" approach that prevails in Latin American integrationist projects (Iranzo & Caballero, 2020).

The flip side of this corridor is the existence of numerous economic links between the inhabitants of both sides. It is a small-scale trade involving local products, basically foodstuffs and other imported products, and takes place in numerous small commercial establishments, concentrated and densified in the so-called *free fairs of Corumbá*.[6]

Free fairs are the most powerful social practice of cross-border and social interaction in this RTF. These are itinerant markets that operate in various parts of the city every day of the week, and on Saturdays, they become a recreational space for city dwellers. Even though the transactions that take place in the fairs do not exceed a few million dollars per year (Batista da Silva, 2013), they have a major impact on the daily life of these communities in economic terms, both because of the number of jobs they generate and because of the lower cost of living in the city. Beyond the economic dimension, these "distribution markets" are incubators of multiple relations that nurture the complex web of cross-border daily life.

These fairs were created by a municipal law in 1952 and subsequently endorsed both in the municipal law of 1990 and the complementary law of 2017. The latter reiterates the municipal responsibility for them, which implies the power to grant authorizations for their establishments and exercise control and planning of their operations.

[6] Local trade in this region is composed of multiple channels that are concentrated in the fairs, but are not limited to them. They involve, for example, a "Chinese mall" established in Puerto Quijarro that attracts Brazilian buyers from different places, as well as an infinity of small stores that deal in merchandise acquired in bargains in Corumbá's own supermarkets or from contraband. A condition for all of them is the lower Bolivian prices due to lower labor costs, but also to the lower tax burden. However, this price advantage may vary from time to time, for example, due to currency exchange rates or the prices of specific products that are incorporated into these trade channels. The ability of Bolivian traders (almost always of Aymara origin) to operate in these commercial labyrinths is a source of annoyance for Brazilian traders who perceive unfair commercial practices. According to a local Brazilian official, this creates the image of a Bolivian capable of using the border more effectively as a resource.

In a study on the subject, Guerrero defines five areas implicit in this responsibility (registration of vendors, guarantee of hygiene during and after the fair, security, fitting out of spaces and strengthening of the association). At the same time, the author stated that all of them were inadequately carried out, which indicated "the omission of the public power" (Guerrero, 2020, p. 56).

A local official interviewed by Guerrero was precise in his description of a situation that he considered to be outside the law:

> The municipality, he said, has very little activity (at the fairs). And I don't think interfering too much is a good idea. [...] If the legislation is done well, it is adapted to reality, and it is considered a good practice because today, the fair is totally outside the law. So, legislation is one thing, and practice is another. (Guerrero, 2020, p. 57)

In practice, the municipal government limits itself to authorizing establishment in a specific urban area and collecting taxes for the use of the spaces, so it can be said that the fairs are self-managed through associations of vendors whose leaders are successful merchants elected in assemblies, but whose mandates can last for long periods. Of these, 73% had worked at the fairs for over five years, about 382 attended daily, and 59% were women. Most vendors offered clothes or vegetable products or had very diverse offerings depending on market opportunities (Maicon, 2018).

The fairs have experienced a growing Bolivian presence. Originally, this presence was segregated, and there was a specific fair that Bolivian vendors could attend. However, with the increased influx of traders from Puerto Quijarro, the segregation ended in 1990, and they were allowed to attend any fair on the condition that they belonged to the association. Since then, Bolivian traders have become a majority presence in these markets and an additional attraction because they can offer a greater variety of products at lower prices. They achieve this through their access to cheaper products in Bolivia and Brazil, where they visit local supermarkets searching for bargains on items that they then resell at the fairs with a profit margin.

They have also achieved successful positions in the circuits of what is considered contraband (and, as such, is repressed by customs agents), but for cross-border traders is simply a type of trade that crosses a blurred and permissive border. As one trader said, this causes frequent conflicts with Brazilian sellers who dispute "the buyers' bag".[7] Nonetheless, it should be recognized that Bolivian labor, particularly that of Bolivian women, is crucial to the cheapness of life in Corumbá.

They have achieved favorable integration compared to the conditions prevailing on the Bolivian side. According to interviews conducted with women fair vendors by Loio (2018), they were able to obtain incomes ranging between USD 150 and USD 300

[7] The interview, mentioned by Guerrero (2020, p. 43) deserves to be quoted:

> Although there is camaraderie, the fair is still a warlike operation, the height of capitalism in the open air and on the track, as the competition is fierce, the size of the buyer's bag. Once it's full, the buyer leaves. And it's up to the greengrocer to convince them to buy a tomato at their counter and not a pineapple at someone else's.

per month, substantially higher than the income of their co-residents in the border strip. This, combined with the use of Brazilian social services, has allowed them to access upward social mobility that they would not have had in their country of origin.

According to a Brazilian professor and social activist, living in Corumbá "is a step forward in the lives of many Bolivians who lack the minimum subsistence conditions in their country" (M. A. M., personal communication, September 20, 2023). Nevertheless, these traders also experienced a painful integration journey into cross-border trade. They survived that itinerary, acquiring skills and knowledge to do business and circumvent the control mechanisms on both sides.

When they lived on the Bolivian side, the women interviewed by Loio (2018) and Maicon (2018) started their workdays—regularly taking only one day off in the week—very early in the morning and returned in the afternoon to begin stockpiling new merchandise, making rounds on their own, or attending to suppliers. A woman interviewed by Maicon (2018, p. 86) explained: "When you live in Bolivia, you have to get up very early, around 3:30 or 4 in the morning, to cross the border and go to the place where the merchandise is stored, load the cars, and go to the markets". For her, that border crossing was the most difficult, as customs officers confiscated merchandise that exceeded the allowed value or that was not produced in Bolivia. To avoid this, the informant explained that small quantities—"very little each day"—were passed through, and the surplus was stored in houses in Corumbá, which implied other expenses but also income for the traders of the fairs.

Consequently, the fairs were a very complex exercise in territoriality, involving the permanent collision of cultures, daily practices and state regulations. At the same time, they were a continuous learning process that—whether for Bolivians or Brazilians—implied the transformation of the "systems of habit and custom" that allow them to "operate" in formal hierarchical partnerships and preexisting partnerships (Heller, 1987). In doing so, they transformed the very nature of the cross-border relation.

Conclusions

Undoubtedly, the region structured around the Corumbá-Ladário-Puerto Suárez-Puerto Quijarro cross-border urban complex constitutes an agglomerated territory (according to Haesbaert, 2019). For this study, it also constitutes an overlapping of territorialities (Agnew & Oslander, 2010) in which formal national and international norms coexist with a myriad of social practices and systems of use (De Certeau, 2008; Heller, 1987) that refer to daily life as a structuring principle of the specifically cross-border reality. This is certainly not a unique situation in this RTF. It is enough to look at the specialized literature to find similar situations in other cases, which opens up new profiles of comparative studies based on the recognition of what Paasi and Prokkolea (2008, p. 16) called the "contextual character" of each cross-border process linked both to the "broader social process... and to the structuring and meaning of daily life on a specific border".

From this perspective, some heuristic suggestions could be advanced that help better outline this field of study.

First, as readers will be able to observe, these constructors of borders are, in the foreground, women and, what is no less relevant, members of native peoples. This draws a landscape whose most visible space is occupied by a woman of Aymara origin, which implies a multiplicity of social situations—classist, gender, ethnic—that generate diverse relations of exploitation/domination and resistance in contexts of intersectionality as Crenshaw (2017) suggests. It also implies the existence of territorial practices and concepts different from Western territorialist worldviews.

A second issue is related to the construction of governance spaces, understood as the continuous processes of institutional construction to regulate conflicting interests for the common good (Milani, 2020) amid the complexities of what Smith (2011) called "multijurisdictional regulation". In this regard, these associations' contentious capacity ensuring precarious cross-border governance deserves more attention.

In other words, the extent to which and how these associations interact with the public space and formal institutions must be analyzed. All indications are that they generally do so through negotiations with formal institutions based on the good faith of the negotiators. However, actions of greater public import may also use existing political mechanisms. An interesting case in this regard occurred in the RTF studied.

Although the segregation of Bolivians in Corumbá's common fairs and their referrals to a single fair called Bras-Bol was eliminated in the late 1990s, the place continued to be occupied by Bolivian traders for different commercial and recreational purposes. Bras-Bol gained local prestige for its specific features, which, according to its opponents, involved high levels of smuggling and, according to its partisans, better prices and a greater variety of products.

Consequently, against the opinion of the Bolivian community, which tried to negotiate its continued existence for its economic and symbolic value, the local government closed it. As a result, the Bolivian community decided to punish the prefect in his reelection aspirations and campaigned intensely for the opposition candidate. The latter was victorious, explained by his tally of about 2 000 votes of Bolivian origin, exactly the difference that gave him the victory. In response, the victorious prefect built a square dedicated to the Virgin of Urkupiña, with a mock sacred grotto in its center, which today is used in the religious festivities of Bolivian migrants.

In any case, this study suggests that the multiple shortcomings of the current border regime's top-down and "securitized" governance open numerous gaps through which different agents pass and act, so that sometimes the gaps are more important than the wall itself. Nevertheless, even in the case of constituted social actors, these dynamics fail to generate democratic governance alternatives and instead generate practices that Jessop (2023) called "reflexive self-organization", with heterarchical and interchangeable orders animated by axiological considerations, solidarities and unconditional loyalties that can strengthen authoritarian components.

Finally, it should be further discerned whether these daily life practices are the forced result of the marginalization of their agents or correspond to cultural and

economic preferences. Rabossi and Tassi (2021) have suggested that the predominance of informality in Central Andean cross-border processes is not a choice but a result of the lack of access to formal mechanisms. There is certainly much evidence in this regard, but the relation mentioned by Rabossi and Tassi is likely less a linear cause-and-effect relation than one of chosen affinity. As a result, the informality contained in cross-border daily life is a more familiar and expeditious field of action than the formal processes, which are plagued by irregularities and corruption.

Edgard Morin (2000) was referring to this when he stated that every society (*Gesellschaft*) contains a community dimension (*Gemeinschaft*) of mythological inspiration. On the Brazil-Bolivia border, this communitarian dimension becomes the very essence of reality.

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Comercio, política y cotidianeidades en una región transfronteriza latinoamericana: el caso de Corumbá/ Puerto Suárez/Puerto Quijarro (Brasil/Bolivia)
Trade, politics and everyday life in a Latin American cross-border region: the case of Corumbá/Puerto Suárez/ Puerto Quijarro (Brazil/Bolivia)

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