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Populations insulaires

I - Les dynamiques démographiques et de peuplement des îles

Transoceanic migration linkages: human mobility's past and present between the Canary Islands and Latin America and the Caribbean

Liens migratoires transocéaniques : le passé et le présent de la mobilité humaine entre les Îles Canaries et l'Amérique latine et les Caraïbes

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Résumés

English Français

The intensity of migratory processes has been a characteristic common to many of the Earth's island spaces which, throughout history, have been projected outwards thanks to the special connectivity that originated the voyages of colonization and, later, the processes of globalization of capitalism, among which tourist activity has had a special impact. All this has forged close relations between the island populations and other peoples in distant places, as can be seen in the case of the Canary Islands, an archipelago that has maintained a clear Atlantic vocation throughout its history.

Thus, one of the chapters of the history of this archipelago that has aroused the most attention from geographers, anthropologists, sociologists, and historians is that of the migration attraction towards Latin America and the Caribbean countries, the main destination of emigrants from the Canary Archipelago in the colonial period and during stages of economic crisis in Spain from the 19th to the 21st centuries. That lure has forged peculiar relationships that, conversely, have contributed to a significant immigration from those regions during the phases of economic prosperity of the Archipelago, at the beginning of the 21st century, and some years before and

after the pandemic. This has turned the Canary Islands into a meeting point between both Atlantic shores.

L'intensité des processus migratoires est une caractéristique commune à de nombreux espaces insulaires. Les motifs de ces liens avec les continents ont évolué avec le temps. Les îles furent parmi les premières terres découvertes lors des grandes expéditions vers les Amériques ou les Indes et furent rapidement des relais géostratégiques importants pour les grandes puissances coloniales ; plus récemment la mondialisation et le développement du tourisme international de masse ont pérennisé l'intensité des liens que les îles entretiennent avec le reste du monde. De ce fait, les populations insulaires ont forgé de nombreux liens avec les populations continentales. Le cas des îles Canaries, un archipel qui a conservé une vocation atlantique tout au long de son histoire, en est une bonne illustration. L'Amérique latine et les pays des Caraïbes ont constitué les principales destinations des émigrants de l'archipel canarien à l'époque coloniale puis pendant les phases de crise économique qui se sont notamment succédé au XIXe et au XXe siècles. Ces liens migratoires ont été étudiés par de nombreux géographes, anthropologues, sociologues et historiens. Depuis le début du XXIe siècle, un mouvement inverse est observé : une immigration importante en provenance d'Amérique latine et des pays des Caraïbes est constaté dans les îles Canaries. Il fait écho à un renversement de tendance économique, la prospérité économique contemporaine de l'archipel contrastant dorénavant avec la crise affectant de nombreux états d'Amérique latine et de la zone caraïbes. C'est à cette situation inédite que cet article est consacré.

Entrées d'index

Mots-clés : Îles Canaries, Amérique latine, Caraïbes, migrations transocéaniques, postcolonialisme, transnationalisme

Keywords: Canary Islands, Latin America, the Caribbean, transoceanic migrations, postcolonialism, transnationalism

Texte intégral

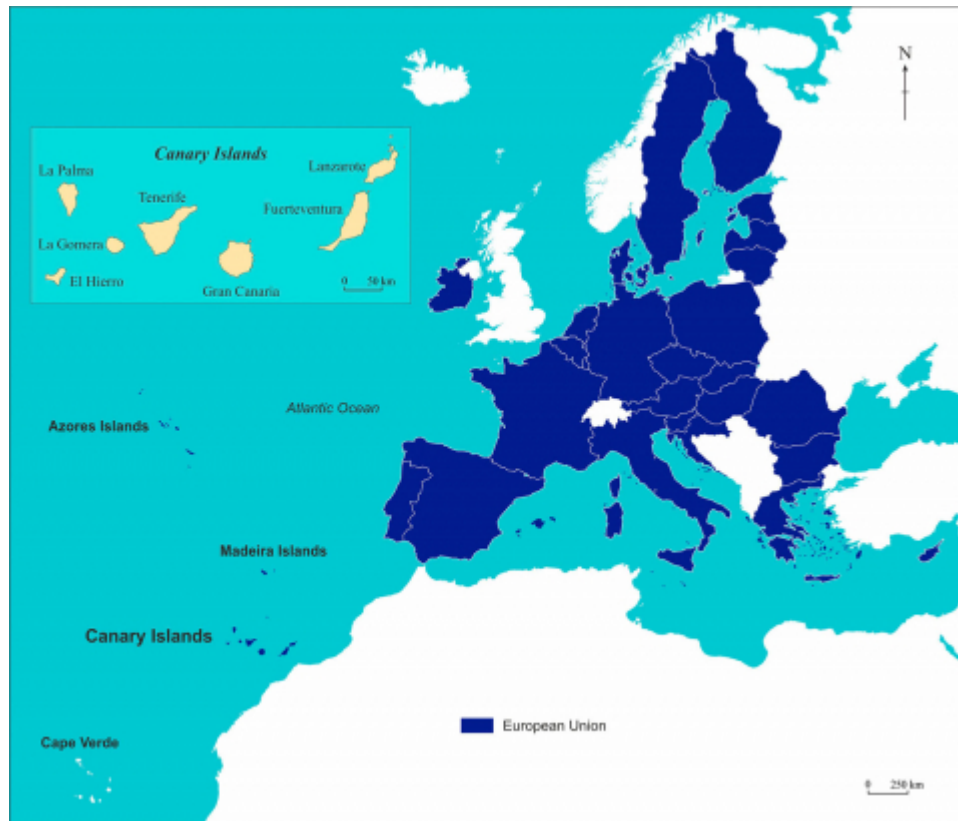
This research has been conducted within the framework of two research projects. The Re-Place Project, which has received funding from the European Union's Horizon Europe Framework Programme for Research and Innovation under grant agreement no. 101094087; and the "Cities in Transition: Urban Fragmentation and New Socio-Spatial Patterns of Inequality in the Post-Pandemic Context" (PID2021-122410OB-C31), funded by the Ministry of Science and Innovation of the Government of Spain (MCIN/AEI/10.13039/501100011033) and the ERDF.

Introduction: The Canary Islands Migration System from a 21st Century Perspective

- 1 Human mobility has been a common feature of many of the Earth's island spaces, which have historically served as sites of immigration, emigration, or passage and connectivity due to colonial development from the 15th century onwards, as well as recent globalization [Connell, 2018]. Understanding island spaces, particularly in the Atlantic, requires a broad historical perspective to interpret such human mobility. This involves considering the relationships between communities in distant locations and the development of transnational practices. From these perspectives, this article aims to study the Canary Islands archipelago's migration system, starting from the premise that it is largely a social, economic, and cultural product of migratory flows and transnationalism developed over a long spatio-temporal cycle.
- 2 From a geographical point of view, the Canary Islands are an Atlantic archipelago, considered an outermost region of the European Union, in a location close to the northwest of the African continent and almost two thousand kilometers from mainland Spain (see Fig. 1). It is a fragmented territory made up of eight main islands and several

islets, with a total surface area of 7,492 km². It is currently home to more than 2.2 million inhabitants.

Figure 1. Location of the Canary Islands



Source: Base map EUROSTAT. Own elaboration.

- 3 The Canary Islands share their volcanic origin with the other Atlantic archipelagos of the Azores, Madeira, and Cape Verde. All of these areas were of enormous importance in the process of Spanish and Portuguese colonial expansion, and they also share a history as territories of migration [Parreño-Castellano *et al.*, 2021]. Until the end of the 19th century, the Canary Islands were oriented towards the production of various monoculture exports that succeeded each other over time. Since then, the economy has diversified, initially with the development of port and commercial activity, and later with the establishment of a productive system that today revolves around the service economy and tourism.
- 4 This historical evolution has shaped the migratory system of the Canary Islands. From this perspective, the general objective of this research is to describe and analyze this system as characteristic of island spaces, highlighting the identification of its elements and dynamics. « There is no doubt that islands have nearly always had an intense engagement with migration – settled by migration in the first place and often deeply affected by migration thereafter » [King, 2009, 63].
- 5 Among the characteristic elements, the scale of outflows relative to the island population and the ideas and practices of migrants, such as transnational associations, stand out. Among the dynamics, strategies such as household decisions and plans for action influenced by international or domestic policies, like rules for recovering ancestors' nationality, must be considered [Maboungue, 1970]. These dynamics establish relationships between various elements that persist over time, while simultaneously new actors emerge in the system, identifying new rules to « the game » [Bakewell, 2014], as occurs with the reconfiguration of the system due to globalization.
- 6 In the case of the Canary Islands, the geographical dimension of human mobility is especially related to Latin America and the Caribbean, with which the archipelago has forged closer ties. Unlike the African continent, where Spanish colonial penetration was much more limited, Latin America and the Caribbean were the focus of much of Spain's conquest and colonization efforts, resulting in a greater long-term flow of goods and

people. In this context, the strategic position of the Canary Islands on navigation routes to these destinations, along with the reinforcement of transatlantic trade after European industrialization, explains the background of this migratory system. Currently, deferred migration and preferential policies for acquiring Spanish nationality for immigrants from these regions have contributed to increasing immigration.

7 Regarding the Canary Islands and the European continent, human mobility has been and continues to be very significant. Historically, this has been linked to the immigration of entrepreneurs, mainly British, specializing in the trade of agricultural products or transatlantic navigation. More recently, the development of tourism and its associated mobility (lifestyle migrants, entrepreneurs, specialized workers, etc.) has gained importance. In the past, emigration flows to Europe were much less substantial, gaining greater quantitative significance only during the economic crisis of 2008 onwards.

8 Therefore, the specific aim of this research is to develop a comprehensive comparative study of the migrations between the Canary Islands and Latin America and the Caribbean, as well as the historical and socioeconomic circumstances surrounding them. The study at hand analyses the most outstanding features of this migration nexus through history: during the colonial era; the stage of the great transoceanic migrations in the 19th and 20th centuries; and at times of globalization, during both critical and expansive phases. These perspectives confirm that the Canarian archipelago has become a relational space, favoring a multiplicity of human mobility flows, while contributing to set a type of transnational relations which feeds the migration itself and demonstrates the close relationships between local and global processes.

9 To develop this analysis, we use four different sources: the compilation of historical documentation as well as some illustrative media texts; statistical information provided by the Spanish National Institute of Statistics (INE) on flows and stocks of Canarian population to/in Latin America, and Latin Americans to/in the Canary Islands; economic and labor market indicators from the INE, and additional information on the networks of migrants. Then, the quantitative methodology presides over the research, but it is complemented with graphic and cartographic representations and a careful historiographic and media selection, as well as the use of a qualitative methodology to approach the transnational links weaved by the associations and social networks of migrants.

10 Therefore, after this introduction on the framework of analysis and the sources and methodology, the text is structured in six sections; the first five address the topic of migrations from a diachronic perspective (during the colonial stage; since the independence of the new American republics; at the turn of the century; throughout the economic and financial crisis; and in pre and post pandemic times), the last section being devoted to the transnational links. The conclusions close the research.

1. The role of migration in the process of colonization and in the first stage of American Independence

11 Guided by the Iberian kingdoms, Renaissance Europe unleashed its first overseas expansion in the so-called Atlantic archipelagos, a geographical microcosm that since then has not ceased to feel the effects of a dynamic of relations between the surrounding continental spheres: Europe, Africa and America [Díaz-Hernández and Domínguez-Mujica, 2012]. Consequently, the geographical position of the Canary Islands has been responsible for the links forged over several centuries between the shores of the African, European and American continents, defining the Atlantic vocation of the archipelago as a land of crossroads.

12 The intermediary and logistical mission of the island enclaves in the conquest and settlement of America proved to be the true function reserved for the Canary Islands in the context of European political and economic expansion, because the islands and America were involved in a growing and intense exchange of people and resources. Plant species that were to be so successful in the Americas, such as sugar cane, were acclimatized in the Canary Islands. On the other hand, potatoes, sweet potatoes and maize arrived early in the archipelago as return products, which diversified the production destined for the self-consumption of the peasant population.

13 From a cultural perspective, the relationship between the Canary Islands and America was one of « back and forth ». Thus, Canarian speech is related to the different dialects of Spanish in Latin America, both in terms of pronunciation and lexicon [Díaz-Hernández and Domínguez-Mujica, 2014], and the artistic currents of the colonial period were tested simultaneously in the archipelago and Hispanic America.

14 Later in time, during the 18th century and the first half of the 19th century, mercantile activity played a singularly important role, helping to channel the migratory process. Day laborers and small rural landowners, pushed by the economic crisis and the processes of social change, « *longed for America as their true homeland and worked as hard to earn their passage as if it were the price of their ransom* » [Alonso de Nava, quoted by Bernal and Macías, 1988]. Among these groups of emigrants were the Canarian settlers who founded the towns of Montevideo and San Antonio, Texas, and those who contributed to the settlement of Louisiana, Florida, Puerto Rico, Venezuelan Guyana, etc.

15 We have to wait until the second half of the 19th century and the first decades of the 20th century, after the independence of the American nations, for foreign emigration to reach its highest level. In the mid-19th century, Venezuela became a preferred destination, due to the demand for labor related to the agricultural sector, but also because of the measures adopted by the State which, in the second half of the century, encouraged immigration in various ways, offering protection, money and other benefits.

16 However, at the end of the century, emigration from the Canary Islands changed its course towards the island of Cuba. The proletarianization of the Canarian peasantry and the extension of systems such as « *medianería* » (joint partnership) contributed to consolidating emigration to that destination. Young bachelors at an early age predominated, although families also emigrated. The former were day laborers who usually traveled under the contract system to work in the sugar cane harvest and with a type of swallow migration. The latter, families of small agricultural landowners, who used this strategy in the face of the cochineal crisis. At the same time, the situation in Cuba was propitious for the entry of white settlers, which created a complex labor market of comings and goings [Ascanio-Sánchez and Domínguez-Mujica, 2011].

17 Another factor that contributed to this emigration was steam navigation. The ships that called at Canary Island ports from the United Kingdom to obtain water, coal and food supplies made the journeys cheaper and easier. In addition, during this period, migratory associations developed, and these aid societies were of enormous importance. At the end of the 19th century, centers of Hispanic descent were created in Cuba, of which those with a Canarian majority stand out for their number and geographical distribution [Guerra, 2009]. These centers offered a channel of communication that favored swallow migration, especially in connection with the sugar harvest.

18 This makes the quantitative analysis of the migratory process to Cuba complex because, along with a significant emigration, there was also many returnees. Thus, according to data estimated by Martín Ruiz [1992], during the first decade of the 20th century, with a new agricultural export model in the Canary Islands, 53,920 Canary Islanders left and 61,930 returned, while during the second decade of the 20th century, because of the crisis caused by the First World War in the archipelago, more than 120,000 Canary Islanders emigrated. This explains why the population of the Canary Islands grew by only 17,647 people between 1910 and 1920 (from 440,016 to 457,663).

19 In fact, at the end of the 19th century, this emigration was considered beneficial by the Cuban population itself. As an example of this, a newspaper published in Havana in

1879 stated:

« *The Canarians do not come to Cuba, with very few exceptions, to carry out high and amusing assignments, to appear on the payroll of the offices... they come to produce. Each one of them brings in his hand, on arriving in these beautiful and hospitable lands, not a rifle or a credential, but the noble and redeeming tools of work. Scattered all over the island, the Canary Islanders have been the true fathers of Cuban agriculture...* ». [Weekly newspaper, *Las Canarias La Havana* (Cuba), 21 May 1879, 14].

- 20 While this is happening in Cuba, in the Canary Islands there are also numerous works published about this emigration, many of which refer to the fortune of the *Indianos*, the colloquial name given to the emigrant who returned rich from America. Among these, we thought it appropriate to extract a fragment of the lecture given by the academic Agustín Millares Carlo to the Canarian Association of Buenos Aires in the 1940s, entitled *El canario de ayer y hoy* (The Canarian of yesterday and today), in which he gives an accurate portrait of the figure of the *Indiano*:

« *There is a long path, shaded by the pomarosa trees, and a very clear irrigation ditch, in the backwaters of which the frogs croak at dusk. Nearby, two steps away, is the farm of the Indiano; he is dressed in a broad suit of raw silk, with the expensive Panama hat and wears the glittering gold fob on his belly. He is the man who was in Havana... in Venezuela, in Peru, or in Argentina. To the uncultivated brain of the island peasant, the only land outside his community is Havana... This is Bana, one often hears in the islands in a pondering tone; and you will all remember that when two peasants are about to cross the threshold of a house together, a dialogue similar to this is often heard: - 'Go in, buddy/- No, buddy, you go in/- You, who were in Havana, first/- Well; then at the same time and in tandem.'* »

- 21 After the Spanish Civil War, there was a new cycle of migration from the Canary Islands, which now went to Argentina, Uruguay and, especially, Venezuela, where the exploitation of the oil fields was beginning to radically transform the country. Back in 1952, Venezuela became the first destination for emigration from the Canary Islands, especially for young men, in a period of open borders, and later, at the end of the decade, for « *family regrouping* » [Maroto and López, 2018]. Although the aim of this emigration was to remain permanently, it also took the form of a movement of return, which consolidated a skein of contacts, an authentic family and ethnic network, which has promoted ties of solidarity, of mutual interest, and compatriot networks. As a result, associationism also spread throughout the country, with the creation of numerous societies that converged in 1990 in the *Federación de Centros Canarios de Venezuela* (Federation of Canarian Centers of Venezuela).

- 22 In those years, work became the central diacritic from which the Canarian group projected itself to the rest of the social groups, as had happened previously in Cuba, and when Creoles and other groups were asked how they perceived Canarian emigration, values centered on work always came up, so that « *being an islander* », as these emigrants were called in Venezuela, became a kind of symbolic capital. It is not surprising, therefore, that the imprint of this emigration is reflected in a literary text in which the effort and sacrifice of the emigrants is glossed over, as if it were a feat:

« *The Canarian has always been, in American lands, a man who has raised to its highest notes the hymn of work/ Yesterday in Cuba and today in Venezuela, only the economic sign of the currency has changed. Yesterday it was Pesos, today it is Bolívars. The canary is the same. Today, like yesterday, he continues to emigrate to America, ready to emulate any feat* » [Álvarez Cruz, quoted by Armas Ayala, 1990].

- 23 In short, for almost five centuries, Latin America and the Caribbean became the preferred destinations for island emigration flows. These were permanent or return movements of young people and families, without forgetting the swallow migrations that took place from the end of the 19th century onwards. After an initial phase in which

Canary Island emigration took part in the process of extensive settlement of the population in the American colonies between the 16th and 18th centuries, the islanders gradually changed their emigration destination depending on the economic and political circumstances of the different Latin American and Caribbean countries, going mainly to Venezuela in the second half of the 19th century, to Cuba during the last decades of the 19th century and the first three decades of the 20th century, to Uruguay and Argentina in the latter period, and to Venezuela again from the middle of the last century onwards.

2. The impact of globalization beyond the return: immigration from Latin America and the Caribbean at the turn of the century

24 As the previous section has shown, foreign emigration was a structural factor in the demographic evolution of the Canary Islands, an escape valve for population growth in a context of periodic crisis of the agro-export economy of the archipelago, until the sixties and seventies of the twentieth century. In those decades, in tandem with the development of tourism, greater economic diversification took place and the demographic trends of the past (high rates of natural growth and cyclical episodes of emigration from abroad), which had been maintained after the Spanish Civil War, gradually changed.

25 After the arrival of some 3.5 million Spaniards in several Latin American and Caribbean countries between 1850 and 1950 [Gil, 2004], the migration trend reversed. In the first stage, there was a reduced flow of emigrants and asylum seekers, which then increased considerably from the 1990s onwards. The same trend is recognized in the Canary Islands, and this is a new phenomenon, as many of these immigrants had no previous links with the archipelago. According to studies carried out on immigration in the Canary Islands in the 1990s, most of those who applied for work permits or asylum status came from Chile and Argentina, having arrived in the Canary Islands years earlier in an attempt to overcome the difficult political situation caused by the dictatorships of Pinochet and Videla, if not in search of professional advancement or simply a higher level of welfare [Domínguez-Mujica, 1996]. Colombians, Uruguayans, etc. also joined these flows. Some of these immigrants benefited from the extraordinary regularization process carried out in 1993, although this was not an incentive for further immigration, as the flow remained at discreet levels until the end of the century, when it increased notably.

26 Since 1999, we can properly speak of intense immigration and, after European residents, citizens from Latin America and the Caribbean have become the largest group of foreigners in the Canary Islands. There are many factors that allow us to interpret this new situation. Firstly, from the perspective of the host country, a significant number of comparative advantages: Spain's membership of the supranational community of the European Union, which facilitates re-emigration processes; the prosperity of the years of economic expansion from 1998-2007; the legal treatment given to immigrants in a situation of administrative irregularity in the regularization processes of 2000, 2001 and the normalization process of 2005; the exemption from entry visa requirements for Colombian nationals until March 2001 and Bolivian nationals until April 2007, among others (in 2001 the European Union included Colombia among the countries for which entry visas were required in the Schengen area and in December 2015 its citizens were again exempted from this rule); the demand for employment in the low-skilled sectors of construction and hotel, commercial and personal services and, above all, a shared language and culture, a colonial heritage that is recognized in the legal acquis, favoring the recovery of Spanish nationality for

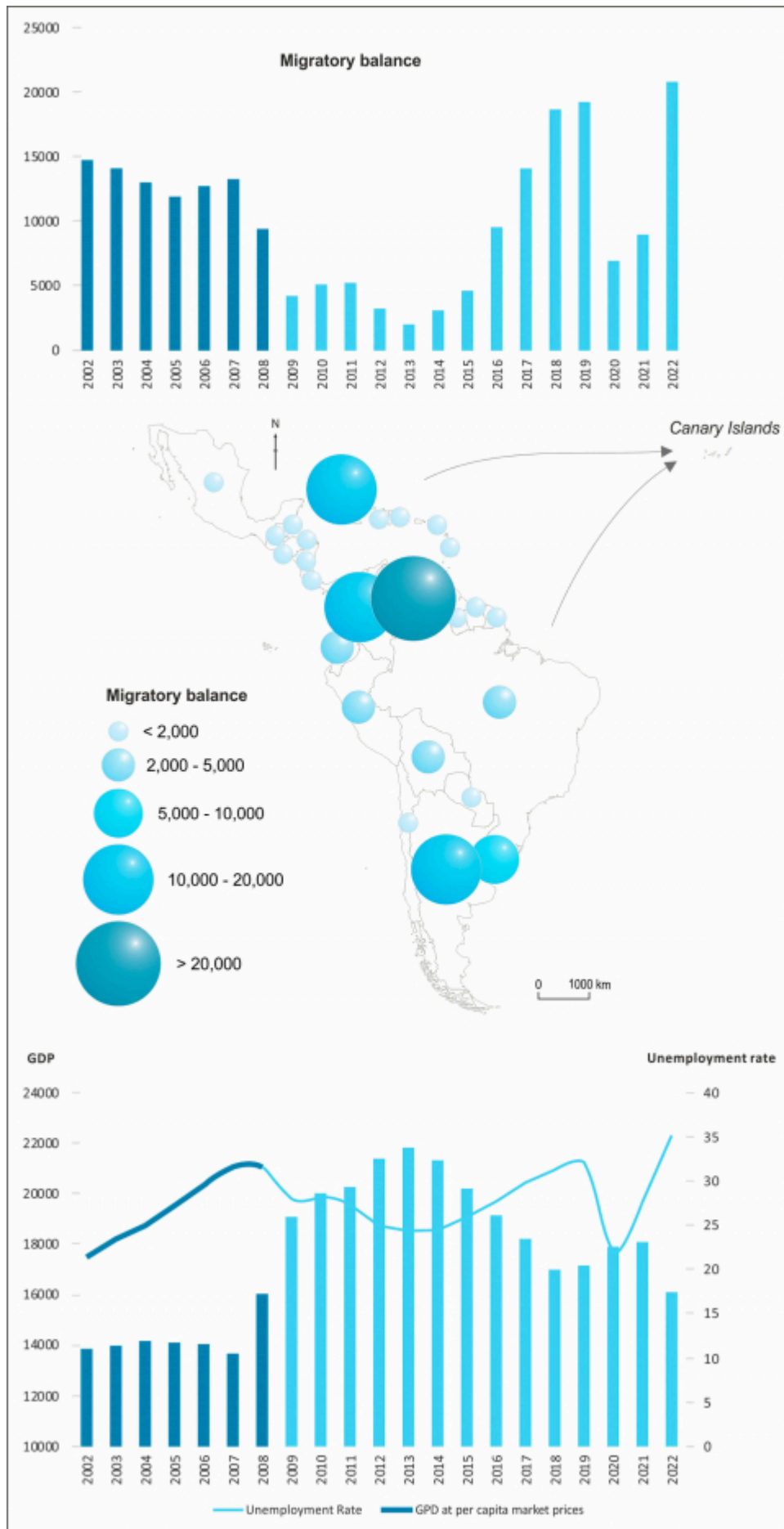
descendants of emigrants or exiles and which exempts Hispanic Americans, Filipinos, Equatoguineans and Sephardim from the period of residence for applying for Spanish nationality (ten years), reducing it to just two.

27 From the perspective of the countries of origin, economic and wage inequality and the structural adjustment policies promoted in Latin America since the 1970s, which have been dismantling the state social welfare apparatus in certain countries, as well as, in general, the « reserve » of labor from the South that is required in the North, are influential. Other factors to take into account are the level of violence in some nations, political and social conflicts, natural disasters and forced displacement due to violence or 'development' megaprojects [Córdova and Castaño, 2015].

28 In short, during the period of economic expansion linked to the real estate boom, in the transition from the 20th to the 21st century, the archipelago received a significant volume of immigrants from Latin America and the Caribbean, as shown by the illustrations of the evolution of the migratory balance and the economic situation that drove it (see Fig. 2). A large part of this immigration was carried out by single women who, after a few years, applied for authorization for family reunification and acted as heads of household, taking advantage of the demand for labor for care services, a demand that increased during the expansionary phases of the Spanish economy as women entered the labor market, and the demographic ageing of the population. In this way, many female immigrants found, in domestic service, a labor niche that facilitated their initial insertion into the labor market and acted as a springboard to other activities in the hotel and catering industry, commerce or other services, while also becoming a niche refuge in times of crisis [Grau-Pineda and Domínguez-Mujica, 2015].

29 However, in the origins of Latin American and Caribbean immigration, certain differences can be seen with respect to Spain as a whole, as certain nationalities are much more represented, maintaining that peculiar link that forged the migration of the past to Cuba or Venezuela, in what has been called « *generationally deferred return* » (see Fig. 2).

Figure 2. Migration rate between Latin America and the Caribbean, and the Canary Islands. Canary Islands economic and labor market data (2002-2008)



Source: Residential Variation Statistics (2002-2021). Migration and change of residence statistics (2022). Unemployment rate (2002-2022). INE. Own elaboration.

3. Human mobility as a strategic asset during global economic crises (2009-2015)

30 From 2009 onwards, the repercussions of the international financial crisis of 2007-2008, to which was added, in the case of Spain, the debt crisis of 2010-2011-2012, had a major impact on the Spanish labor market, to the extent that unemployment rates exceeded all records, ranking first in the entire European Union, along with those of Greece (over 25% unemployment in 2012). The effect of the crisis (financial and real estate crisis) was mainly felt in the construction labor market, which caused many immigrants to lose their jobs in addition to Spanish workers [Domínguez-Mujica *et al.*, 2012]. In this economic situation, a wide variety of strategies were developed by the foreign population: return of the family or of some of its members, re-emigration, Spanish nationalization, acceptance of even less qualified jobs, sharing housing, etc., all depending on personal circumstances, length of residence in Spain and the nation of origin.

31 To alleviate the unemployment situation, and especially the unemployment of immigrants, the Spanish government adopted a series of legal measures to encourage return, encouraging voluntary mobility, as a survival strategy in times of crisis, to be accompanied by induced mobility, which gave a pendular character to migratory flows [Avila-Tàpies and Domínguez-Mujica, 2015]. The Ministry of Employment and Social Security financed these programs, which were supplemented by European funds for return and asylum, managed by non-governmental organizations. These were the Program of complementary aid for the cumulative and early payment of contributory unemployment benefits to non-EU foreign workers who voluntarily returned to their countries of origin (APRE); the Productive Voluntary Return Program; and the Voluntary Return Program for Social Care.

32 In Spain as a whole, the first of these, the most comprehensive, meant that between 12 November 2008 and 17 June 2009, 4,140 applications were approved, totaling 6,303 people (applicants plus family members). From 2009 to 2014, 11,572 applicants (5,135 Ecuadorians; 1,779 Colombians; 1,162 Argentinians; 880 Peruvians; etc.) were granted complementary return assistance under this program.

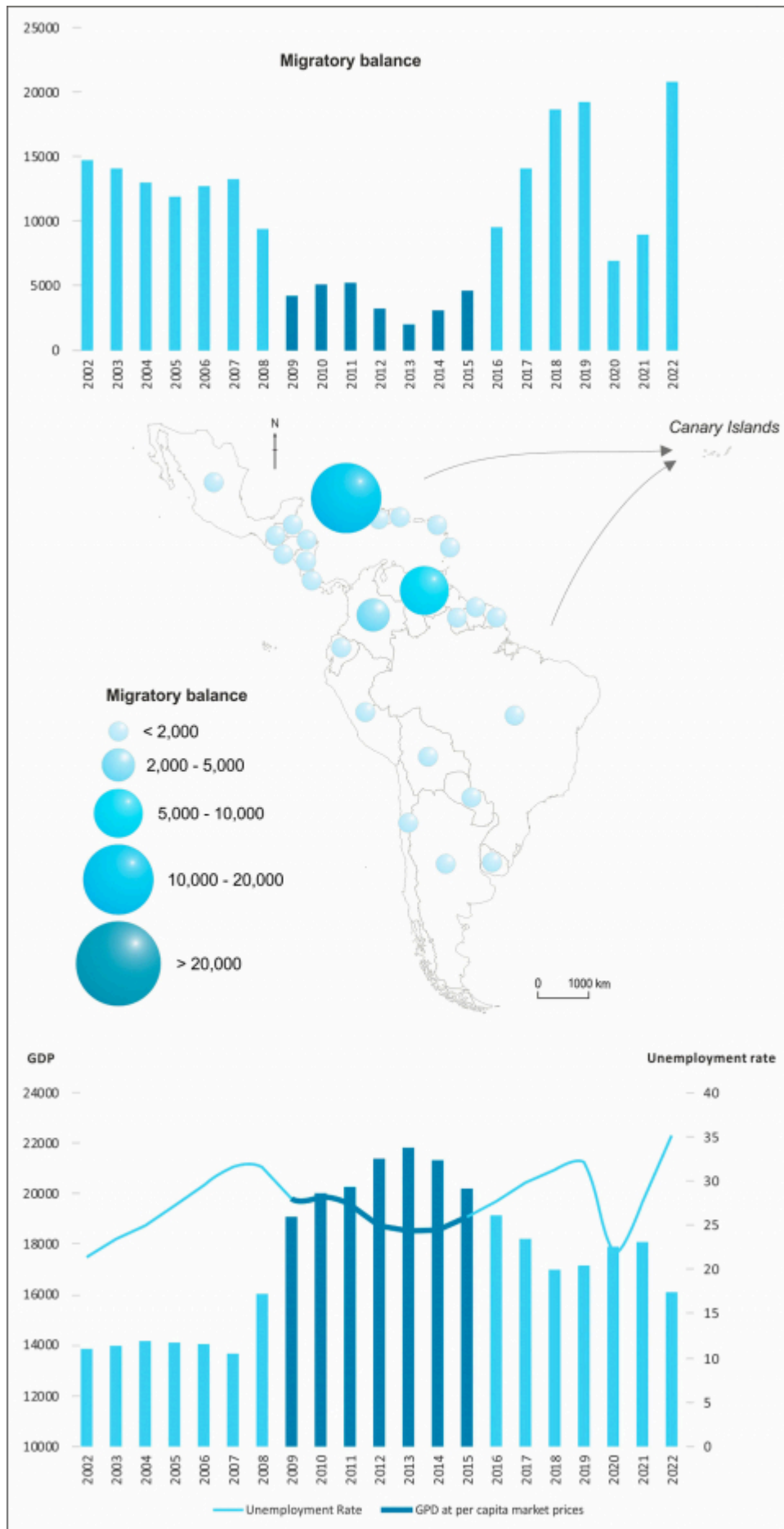
33 The Productive Voluntary Return Program, aimed at non-EU immigrants not subject to the obligation to return who wished to undertake a business project associated with their return, received the fewest applications (199 between 2010 and 2011), while the Voluntary Return Program for Social Care, aimed at non-EU immigrants in a situation of special vulnerability, verifiable through the Social Services of their area of residence or specialized NGOs, received a total of 15,549 applications: 3,250 from Bolivians, 1,925 from Argentines, 1,913 from Brazilians, 1,653 from Ecuadorians and 1,157 from Paraguayans [Ministry of Employment and Social Security, 2015].

34 However, the impact of these measures was not as significant as expected, despite the increase in the number of Latin Americans leaving Spain, particularly from the Canary Islands to countries such as Venezuela, Argentina, Colombia, and Cuba, and secondarily to Chile, Ecuador, and Uruguay. This marks a reversal of immigration flows compared to the period of Spanish prosperity a few years earlier. Nevertheless, even during the years of crisis, emigration (return and re-emigration) does not surpass the level of arrivals, transforming mobility into a new scenario of back-and-forth movements. While immigration flows are indeed decreasing, their numbers still exceed those of emigration (see Fig. 3), partly because outflows data are somewhat under-registered in the Continuous Census (Padrón), as noted by Larramona in 2013.

35 On the other hand, the emigration flows of these years also included a new process that further strengthened the links between the Canary Islands and Latin America: the emigration of young Spanish adults to certain Latin American countries where they sought to satisfy their employment expectations (Brazil at a time of prosperity, Chile,

Peru, Ecuador, Panama, etc.) [Pérez-Caramés *et al.*, 2019]. Most of them were young engineers, architects, economists, etc. who, attracted by the demand for highly qualified professionals in certain segments of the labor market in Latin American countries, contributed to the consolidation of a new diaspora of the Canary Islands population. This period was also influenced by the internationalization of Spanish companies that undertook infrastructure projects in these countries and needed their technicians to carry them out. This emigration has not lasted in great degree over time, which confirms that it was a temporary phenomenon associated with the Spanish economic crisis; however, there is no doubt that it contributed to replacing the old emigration patterns with a much more fluid relationship between the two sides of the Atlantic, which has left a significant mark on certain transnational phenomena.

Figure 3. Migration rate between Latin America and the Caribbean, and the Canary Islands. Canary Islands economic and labour market data (2009-2015)



Source: Residential Variation Statistics (2002-2021). Migration and change of residence statistics (2022). Unemployment rate (2002-2022). INE. Own elaboration.

4. The SARS-CoV-2 Pandemic: a pause in the path to immigration resumption (2016-2020)?

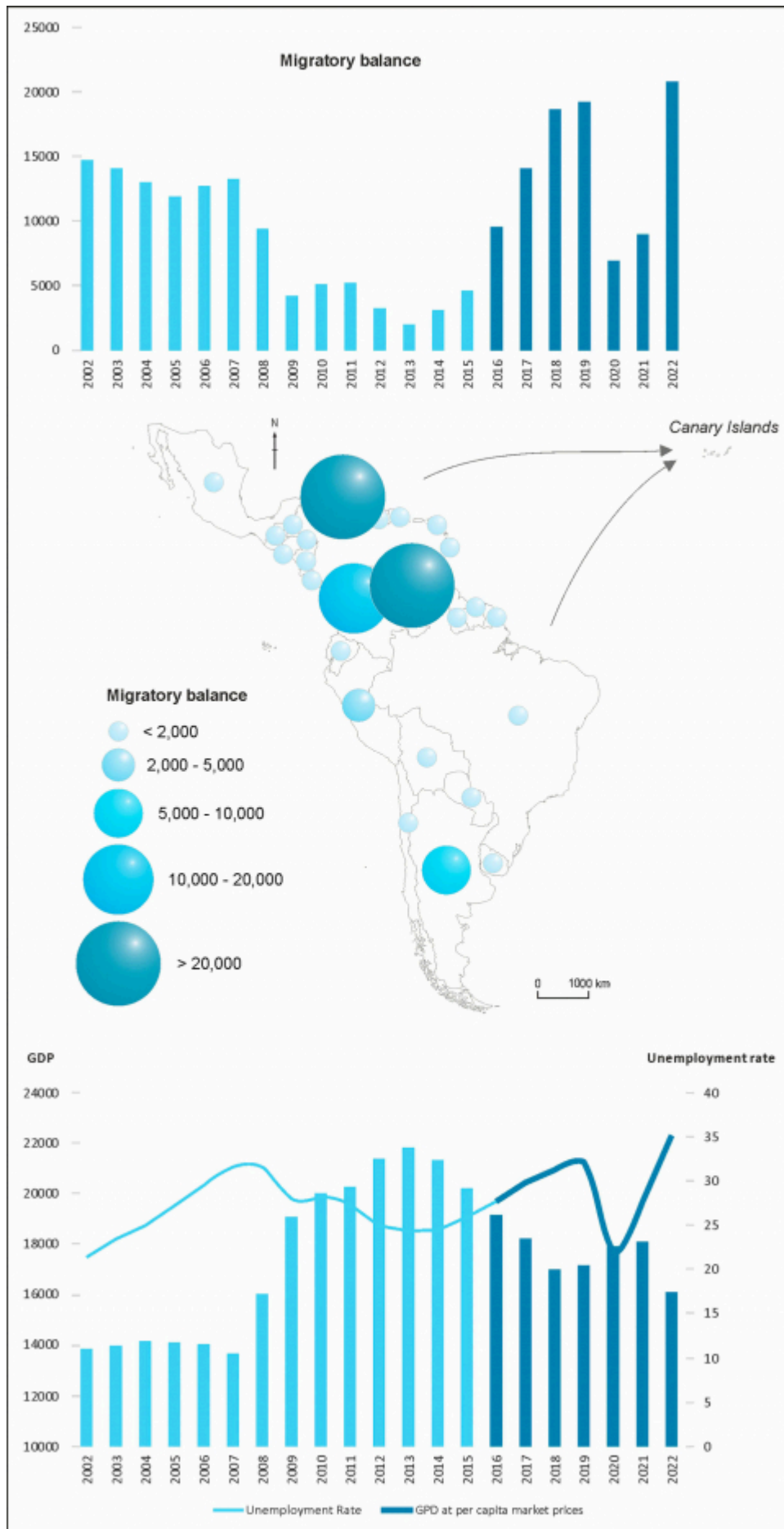
36 As we have been mentioning, the period of economic crisis worsened after 2011, with the policy of cuts and containment of public spending, in application of the austerity measures imposed by the European Union on Spain and other European countries, which led to the economic situation in the Canary Islands weakening considerably. We must wait until 2016 and beyond to recognize a path of improvement, as can be seen in Figure 4 (see Fig. 4). The increase in Gross Domestic Product per capita and the recovery in employment are its unmistakable signs. Parallel to this economic recovery, immigration from abroad resumed strongly [Domínguez-Mujica *et al.*, 2020], although the COVID-19 pandemic introduced a new inflection in 2020, because of mobility limitations and border closures [Domínguez-Mujica and Rodríguez-Rodríguez, 2023] (see Fig. 4). At the same time, there was a breakdown in the evolution of the regional economy and the labor market, although the economic and health crisis that caused the spread of the coronavirus was notably shorter-lived, as the measures adopted by the government, in line with a new economic policy on the part of the European Union, favored the adoption of resilience measures that allowed for a much better recovery from the situation.

37 When correlating economic indicators with the number of immigrants from abroad in the period 2016-2022, figures close to 1 are reached. Specifically, the correlation between GDP and the migration balance is 0.86 and between the employment rate and the migration balance is 0.97, according to Pearson's correlation coefficient. In other words, immigration once again acquires an important significance after the pandemic, thanks to the attraction of the positive evolution of the archipelago's economy, an economy that is not very competitive and productive, which demands low-skilled labor. Conversely, immigrants themselves contribute to consolidating the characteristics of this labor market, as indicated in the recently published report entitled « *Cohesion Policy in the Outermost Regions* » [European Parliament, 2024].

38 However, beyond this generalization, a detailed analysis of immigration flows from Latin America and the Caribbean to the Canary Islands reveals their unique characteristics within the context of Spain. According to data from the 2021 Population Census, individuals residing in the Canary Islands whose place of birth was Central America, the Caribbean, and South America accounted for 49 percent of the total foreign-born population in the Canary Islands. In contrast, in Spain as a whole, immigrants from these regions represented 43.7 percent of the total foreign-born population.

39 The singularity, however, is not only determined by these data, but also by the specific origin of these immigrants. Thus, immigrants born in Latin America and the Caribbean occupy secondary positions in Spain as a whole, after Morocco and Romania, while in the Canary Islands, Venezuela and Cuba are the first countries of birth of immigrants, to the extent that the Cuban community has a larger number of members in the Canary Islands than in any other Spanish Autonomous Community, and the volume of immigrants from Venezuela is also very significant, the largest after Madrid [Rodríguez-Rodríguez *et al.*, 2021; Díaz Hernández *et al.*, 2021]. This special attraction for the Canary Islands confirms what we had already mentioned, the legacy of past emigration, with a strong significance in the transnational processes described below [González Bernaldo and Jedlicki, 2012].

Figure 4. Migration rate between Latin America and the Caribbean, and the Canary Islands. Canary Islands economic and labor market data (2016-2022)



Source: Residential Variation Statistics (2002-2021). Migration and change of residence statistics (2022). Unemployment rate (2002-2022). INE. Own elaboration.

5. Migrant transnationalism through associations on both sides of the Atlantic

40 Migrations are open demographic events, that is, the event we are analyzing necessarily links two populations: the one of origin, which the emigrant leaves, and the one of destination, which he/she joins. One of the most interesting ways of analyzing this link between the two societies is related to transnational manifestations, that is, to the networks that e/immigrants create in both sending and receiving societies, once the flows become more dynamic and universal.

41 In this way, transnationalism has become one of the fundamental approaches to understanding contemporary migrant practices. It provides a new perspective on the complexity of social relations established between countries and offers an analytic framework that highlights the increasing intensity and scope of information and symbolic flows triggered by international migration [Vertovec, 2009]. One of the most representative of these transnational practices is the formation of associations. This practice allows migrants to build bridges between host and home societies, facilitating certain forms of socialization that enable them to maintain various social, religious, cultural, and political relations with other compatriots, other immigrants, and the local society.

42 In contrast to the patterns of associationism of the past, the great development of new technologies in transport, communications and information has multiplied contacts and movements between both sides of the Atlantic, encouraging the construction of multiple identities in an increasingly interdependent global socio-economic context. In fact, today's associationism is creating a new transnational scenario that is much more fluid, with a more intense exchange of relations between migrants and the societies to which they belong and host societies.

43 Well, as a way of approaching these processes, it is worth bearing in mind that the number of entities abroad created by Canarian emigrants in Latin American and Caribbean countries is 33 in 2024 (20 in Venezuela, 4 in Argentina, 4 in Uruguay, and 1 in each of these countries: Brazil, Chile, Cuba, Mexico and Puerto Rico). These are non-profit institutions subsidized by the Government of the Canary Islands in the countries where island communities live. They keep alive the culture and traditions of the archipelago and help to care for the most disadvantaged migrants and descendants [Gobierno de Canarias, 2024].

44 At the same time, the number of organizations of Latin American and Caribbean immigrants in the Canary Islands is very high, having been created mostly during the economic boom of the early years of the 21st century, and in 2015 there were more than sixty clubs, associations, etc., at which point new forms of association began to gain importance through virtual contacts, with which they began to coexist.

45 Among these new mechanisms of interaction and social relations, we would like to refer to those that were created in two different stages and by different agents. On the one hand, during the 2008-2015 crisis, Spanish emigrants abroad set up different associations that functioned as forms of virtual contact, in tune with the rise of social networks, and which contributed to strengthening the transnational practices of the so-called e-migrants. Specifically, we refer to Marea Granate, a transnational and non-partisan collective formed by emigrants from Spain and their sympathizers, whose aim was to fight against the causes and those who provoked the economic and social crisis that forced them to emigrate [<http://mareagranate.org/>]. Its origins are found in large part in the Indignados Movement, « *more specifically in one of its subsidiary social movements, called Youth Without Future and it established itself as a horizontal movement, with regular face to face and virtual meetings at the local and global level, fostering new forms of participation, self-organization and demands for rights beyond borders* » [López-Sala, 2017, 276-277]. In Latin America and the Caribbean,

among others, there have been: Marea Granate Maringa, Marea Granate Buenos Aires, Marea Granate Mexico, Marea Granate Colombia, Marea Granate Peru, Marea Granate Central America and Marea Granate Uruguay.

46 On the other hand, the most numerous Latin American groups in the Canary Islands have also created virtual communities, the number of which has been increasing in recent years, in parallel with the intensity of immigration, both due to the economic crisis in their place of origin and to the contact of the networks already established in the archipelago. We are referring in particular to Venezuelans and Cubans who use WhatsApp, Facebook, Instagram, X, etc. groups to connect and support each other, particularly with regard to the dissemination of socio-political or legal news; facilitating contacts for sending and receiving packages; information on the labor market (demand and supply of jobs) and housing (renting); information on events related to different cultural manifestations, be they musical or culinary, for example. Examples of these are: Cubans in the Canary Islands, Venezuelans in the Canary Islands, etc.

6. Conclusions: migration between the Canary Islands and Latin America and the Caribbean from a comparative perspective

47 As we have seen throughout the text, the Atlantic position of the Canary Islands has meant that, since the beginning of Spanish colonial expansion in America, migratory links have been established between the islands and Latin America and the Caribbean, in keeping with the archipelago's character as a crossroads. These links have been an essential element that has shaped the social and cultural identity of a small archipelago.

48 Although, with differentiating nuances, given that migrations have developed in different macroeconomic structures (colonial mercantile, industrial, post-industrial, and global or digital capitalism), it is possible to detect some relevant characteristics that define the relationship or migratory model of the Canary Islands with the countries of Latin America and the Caribbean (see Table 1).

Table 1. Characteristics of the migration pattern between Latin America and the Caribbean and the Canary Islands

Characteristics	XVI-XX	XXI
Direction	From the Canary Islands to America	From America to the Canary Islands
Flows	Back and forth, swallow	Back and forth, re-emigration, generationally deferred return
Spatial domains	Rural	Rural and Urban
Main countries	Venezuela, Cuba, Argentina	Venezuela, Cuba, Argentina, Colombia
Qualifications	Low	Low and high
Gender	Male-dominated	Female-dominated
Size	Increasing	High

Source: Own elaboration.

49 In general terms, we can recognize two major migratory stages. The first, which lasts until the end of the 20th century, is characterized by emigration from the Canary

Islands, while the second, which has extended over the last twenty-five years, is essentially made up of Latin American migrants arriving in the Canary Islands. In the first case, it is a migratory relationship driven by demographic pressure and the economic specialization of the archipelago. The migratory link, beyond the role played by the islands in relations between the metropolis and the colony, must be interpreted as an escape valve for the Canaries in situations of crisis in their economic model. Even the recent migration of young people, which originated in the economic crisis that took place between 2008 and 2014, responds to a similar motivation. The migration pattern of recent decades is more complex, but obviously the underlying factor is also the economic and political crisis, in this case in many Latin American countries.

50 Although the migration process has been characterized by negative and positive balances in the Canary Islands at one stage or another, a significant proportion of the flows have been back and forth, especially since the end of the 19th century. Even part of the emigration from the Canary Islands, with the 2008 crisis (of both Canary Islanders and Latin Americans), has been characterized by its pendular nature. In addition to the importance of return, in the last decades of the 19th century and the first decades of the following century, there were also swallow migrations to Cuba, linked to the sugar cane harvest. At the same time, in recent years mobility has become more complex, with back-and-forth processes and re-emigration to other destinations within the Spanish state, or to other European countries and the USA, as well as emigration of the population born in the Canary Islands.

51 In the past, emigration was essentially made up of rural workers and small landowners. The proletarianization of the countryside and the land structure were the most important underlying factors. Rural areas became the main receiving areas, at least initially. In a different sense, current Latin American emigration to the Canary Islands comes from both rural and urban areas, but in the Canary Islands migrants settle in urban areas and carry out urban activities.

52 In the first context described, Canarian emigration concerned young men and families, and was generally a low-skilled migration. The emigration of Latin Americans to the Canary Islands is also mainly made up of workers with a low or medium level of qualifications, having a different dimension as the processes developed in very different periods. However, it is not a masculinized migration nor is it linked to agricultural activity.

53 The migratory flows from the Canary Islands were predominantly directed towards specific Latin American and Caribbean countries, primarily Venezuela and Cuba, and secondarily Argentina and Uruguay. This concentration of migrants in particular destinations reflects a common characteristic of island spaces. Similarly, Latin Americans arriving in the Canary Islands often originate from these same countries, indicating the existence of established migratory channels, which is typical of destinations where migrant networks have reached a significant level of representation.

54 Finally, the migratory links forged throughout history between the Canary Islands and Latin America and the Caribbean have been changing in favor of more intense mobility. Since the middle of the 20th century and, above all, since the end of the first decade of the 21st century, the flows of Latin Americans coming to carry out low-paid jobs in the Canary Islands have acquired great intensity.

55 Four clearly defining elements emerge from the characteristics of the migratory model described above. The first is that it is a long-haul, in terms of time, high-intensity mobility. The number of emigrants from the Canary Islands is very high in relation to the population of the archipelago, especially from the 19th century until the 1960s. Similarly, arrivals to the Canary Islands from Latin America are also significant, mirroring trends observed in other Atlantic islands. Despite their geographic isolation, these island spaces exhibit characteristics of open migration flows.

56 Secondly, mobility is characterized by a strong territorial concentration. Most Canarians emigrate to the same Latin American countries throughout the long period analyzed, with a preferential selection of destinations. The outward mobility from island spaces reproduces, to a certain extent, that of the destinations of other Atlantic

archipelagos, as has been observed in studies referring to the migratory links of Madeira, the Azores, or Cape Verde with America [Carling and Åkesson, 2009; Resende-Santos, 2016].

57 Thirdly, the Canary Islands model is characterized by the importance of return flows, to such an extent that the current migratory flows of Latin Americans arriving in the Canary Islands originate in the countries to which the Canary Islanders have emigrated, making it a generationally deferred return mobility or a generationally deferred outbound and return mobility. This character determines that the impact of the migratory process is very relevant in Canarian society beyond the strictly economic aspects, favoring hybrid societies. However, we cannot consider that this process of deferred return currently aligns with the principles of the MIRAB (Migration; Remittances; Aid; Bureaucracy) model [Bertram and Watters, 1985], since this immigration is an unrelated labor immigration with the flows of remittances. These individuals arrive in the Canary Islands with limited resources, seeking a better future, unlike return migrations observed in other Atlantic archipelagos such as Cape Verde.

58 Finally, despite the distance between origin and destination, the migration model has favored transnationalism since the 19th century and especially in recent decades. Associationism is a clear expression of this transnational sentiment. This scenario of mobility in various directions in recent years has given rise to new transnational practices, in correspondence with the effects of globalization, the rise of information and communication technologies and the increase in air connections. Consequently, the analysis of current migratory processes between both sides of the Atlantic shows that we are facing pendular, heterogeneous and segmented movements, which further strengthen human relations in a changing world.

59 The question arises as to whether the current situation, given its quantitative dimension and the evolution of the socio-economic system towards a global labor market, will develop into a scenario that will go beyond the conjunctural. In other words, whether we need to assess the links between the two territories in a new framework of mobility in which the islands will continue to maintain their character as relational spaces. The answer must undoubtedly be sought in the future of global capitalism itself, in the socio-political and economic situation of the different countries, and in the role that the Canary Islands and Latin America and the Caribbean will play in this scenario.

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