Franck Düvell

Quo vadis, Migration Studies? The Quest for a Migratory Epistemology

Abstract

This article starts by sketching the links between changing mobility and migration patterns, processes of social transformation, corresponding migration control policies, and related perceptions of social problems. It acknowledges that since the 1980s in the US and the 1990s in Europe, migration studies have come of age, bringing about a plethora of typologies, concepts, and theories. However, the knowledge production of migration studies is haunted by a range of frustrations, including unconvincing definitions, lack of data, reductionism, short-range theories, often biased research funding practices, usually negative public and political discourse, and an underlying dominant perspective of the nation-state and thus an omnipresent sedentary bias. In contrast, this article offers some cornerstones of reflexive migration studies and drafts a migratory epistemology that takes inspiration from feminist and postcolonial epistemologies, resting on complexity thinking and acknowledging key intersectionalities while being rooted in thorough ethical reflections so as to contemplate the (re)politization of research.

Keywords

Migration theory, reframing, migratory epistemology, complexity thinking, reflexive approach

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Dr. Franck Düvell
Institute for Migration Research and Intercultural Studies (IMIS), Osnabrück University, and German Centre for Integration and Migration Research (DeZIM), Berlin

Stand, Herausforderungen und Perspektiven der Migrationsforschung / Zeitschrift für Migrationsforschung – Journal of Migration Research 2021 1 (1): 215–241,
https://doi.org/10.48439/zmf.v1i1.106

Wie weiter mit der Migrationsforschung? Auf der Suche nach einer migratorischen Erkenntnistheorie

Dieser Artikel beginnt mit einer Skizze des Zusammenhangs von Mobilitäts- und Migrationsmustern, Prozessen sozialen Wandels sowie damit verbundenen Migrationskontrollpolitiken und Wahrnehmungen sozialer Probleme. Er würdigt, dass die Migrationsforschung seit den 1980er Jahren in den USA und seit den 1990er Jahren in Europa erwachsen geworden ist und zahlreiche Typologien, Konzepte und Theorien hervorgebracht hat. Dennoch ist die Wissensproduktion gekennzeichnet durch eine frustrierende Reihe von wenig überzeugenden Definitionen, einen Mangel an Daten, zu kurz greifende Theorien, oftmals voreingenommene Forschungsförderpraktiken, meist negativ konnotierte öffentliche und politische Diskursen, eine den Betrachtungen zugrunde liegende Fokussierung auf den Nationalstaat sowie die allgegenwärtige Vorstellung von der Sesshaftigkeit als gesellschaftlicher Normalität. Alternativ dazu greift dieser Beitrag einige Kernideen reflexiver Migrationsstudien auf und skizziert eine migratorische Erkenntnistheorie, welche Anregungen aus feministischen und postkolonialen Erkenntnistheorien aufgreift, auf ›complexity thinking‹ beruht sowie wesentliche Intersektionalitäten anerkennt. Sie ist zugleich ethisch grundiert und berücksichtigt auch die (Re)Politisierung von Forschung.

Schlagwörter

Migrationstheorie, Perspektivenwechsel, migratorische Erkenntnistheorie, reflexiver Ansatz

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Introduction

This article aims to critically take stock of migration research; it draws on the approaches of complexity thinking, reflexive sociology, and reframing to identify the various problems of migration studies. Notably, it takes inspiration from feminist epistemology and argues that an individual's (im-) mobility characteristics and position in the »global hierarchy of mobility« (Bauman 1998, p. 69) – just as in power relations (see Alcoff 2013 on Foucault) and gender – »does and ought to influence our conceptions of knowledge, knowers, and practices of inquiry and justification« (Anderson 2020, p. 1). A mi-

gratory epistemology[1] thus explores »how dominant conceptions and practices of knowledge attribution, acquisition, and justification disadvantage [migrants] […] and strives to reform them to serve the interests of this group« (paraphrased from Anderson 2020, p. 1). To this end, some elements for a migratory epistemology are proposed. First, this article sketches the scope of migration and mobility, examines the context in terms of the dynamics of social transformation, and considers how these shape the forms and patterns of migration before depicting various policy responses. Second, the article delineates corresponding cycles of migration studies and implies how this has been partly shaped by state perspectives. Third, the article reveals conflicting definitions, distortions, and biases that characterize most contemporary migration research. The fourth section is concerned with theoretical, conceptual, and methodological challenges. Fifth, this article analyzes distortions and biases of migration research. The sixth section identifies some cornerstones for a reflexive approach in migration studies. Finally, in order to overcome the one-sided sedentary bias in most conventional migration research, the article concludes by drafting prerequisites of more nuanced and scientific knowledge production and thus some elements of a new migratory epistemology.

1 Social Transformation and the Changing Character of Migration

This section lays out the nexus of social transformation; the changes in the scope, direction, and character of migration; and the related policy responses. It also establishes the diversity of actors, thereby demonstrating the complexity at issue. Finally, this section shows what this means for a new epistemology on migration.

International migration has changed considerably in scope and character over the past 150 years. Notably, over the last five decades, international travel and mobility have increased more than 850%, from 165 million arrivals in 1970 to 1.3 billion arrivals in 2017 (see Vellas and Becherel 1995; UNWTO 2018). Meanwhile, global migration has increased from 84 million (2.2% of the global population) in 1970 to 272 million migrants (3.5% of the world's population) in 2020 (IOM 2020). Although this is an increase of 50%, the migrants' share of the global population still remains small. Taken together, these figures demonstrate that short-term mobility is increasing at a much

1 ›Migratory‹ is used as an adjective similar to feminist, anti-racist, or postcolonial epistemologies; it is thus different from an epistemology of migration, in that it strives to serve the interests of the migrants.

faster pace than long-term mobility or migration. However, migrants are unevenly dispersed: in OECD countries, migrants now represent 10–30% of the working population (up from 5% in 1960) (Goldin et al. 2018), and the 60 million immigrants in Europe represent 12% of the population. Of these, only 7.5% were born outside the union (Eurostat 2018); even the recent so-called refugee crisis added no more than the equivalent of 0.3% to the EU population. In any case, the 38 million non-EU immigrants in the EU are still only equivalent to 65–75% of all Europeans who emigrated to the ›new world‹ and the colonies during the 18th, 19th, and 20th centuries, which represents some of the backdrop to contemporary migration. If the Russian Federation with its 12 million immigrants is included, the ratio of European emigration and immigration has probably just reached an equilibrium. Moreover, more than half of the global population has migrated within their countries (Düvell 2006a). These long-term dynamics of migration have been shaped simultaneously by the major political and economic transformations that have been transforming countries and societies of origin and destination (see section 3). However, such a simple numerical description masks important changes in the characteristics of migration and thus contributes little to an understanding of the meaning of migration.

The modern era is characterized by fundamental social changes culminating in various economic crises and political revolutions. For instance, the 19th century saw the end of the transatlantic slave trade and indentured labor along with the industrialization and urbanization in Europe and America, which transformed the relations between workers and capitalists, while the invention of the welfare state fundamentally changed the relations between states and their citizens. From 1914 to 1945, humanity suffered from various regional wars and two world wars; subsequently, the era of empires ended and brought about the emergence of modern (nation) states. The 1940s and 1950s saw not only the end of colonialism but also the rise of a bipolar world order, as well as a massive process of post-war reconstruction and an economic boom of the transatlantic region. This came to an end with the oil crisis in 1973, and the following decades marked the beginning of an industrial transformation in the Global North from manufacturing to service industries, as well as the rise of new economic powers in the Global South – first the Gulf countries, and then the ›Newly Industrialized Countries‹ (NICs), such as the so-called ›Asian Tigers‹. The year 1989 was another watershed: the collapse of the Soviet Union and the Comecon and the end of the Cold War not only triggered an economic transformation of the former socialist countries but also gave rise to the BRICS[2] and MINT[3] groups, while the

2 Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa.

end of the bipolar world order gave way to the (somewhat violent) emergence of a new multipolar world order. Finally, since the 1980s, global economic integration (›globalization‹), new trade relations (including new south-south interactions) and technological advances, notably the prevalence of the passenger jet, and the rise of information and communication technologies (ICT) (coined as the Fourth Industrial Revolution) not only transformed the way we work but also increase migration opportunities, improved the migration infrastructure, and changed the way we travel by providing fast, safe, and cheap transportation. Most recently, several hundred years of fossil fuel-driven technologies have caused a global change of the climate. Finally, the current period is characterized by the emergence of »risk societies« (Beck 1986) and »liquid modernities« (Bauman 2000) meaning (among other things) precarisation and deepening inequality.

These partially-overlapping and mutually-reinforcing technological advances, social transformations, and climate changes have shaped and changed the character of international migration (also see Baganha et al. 2008). The 1750s to the 1900s saw permanent settler migration from Europe to the Americas, Australia, New Zealand, and parts of Africa; large-scale forced migration of slaves across the Atlantic; and enormous migrations within Asia and Africa. The 1910s to 1940s especially, but even the decades into the 1970s, were characterized by forced migration largely fueled by wars, persecution, and anti-colonial violence as well as ethnic or political ›unmixing‹ seen in Europe, the Indian subcontinent, and Vietnam (Marrus 1985). At the same time, new hostilities and increasingly restrictive migration regimes also ended intra-European and transatlantic migration systems. From the 1950s to the 1970s, recruitment policies in northern Europe triggered large-scale north-south labor migration (›guestworker‹), followed by family migration, primarily of people coming from former colonies or allied countries to Europe, and thus a small number of key countries of origin. However, the events of 1989 and the fall of the Iron Curtain facilitated the beginning of »new [forced and economic] migrations« (Koser and Lutz 1998): as several countries went through migration transitions and turned from net emigration to net immigration countries, »new geographies of migration« emerged in Italy, Spain, Portugal, and Greece (see King 2002). Also, some »feminization of migration« was noted, in particular from the 1960s to the 1980s (Donato and Gabaccia 2016). New travel and information and communication technologies (ICT) facilitated ever-more mobile and transnational migration strategies. Consequently, since the 1990s, migrants have come from and moved to more and more countries so that migration has become »super-directional« (Düvell

3 Mexico, Indonesia, Nigeria, Turkey.

2009; Goldin 2018), resulting in increasingly super-diverse societies (Vertovec 2007). Meanwhile, the full scope of climate-change induced migration remains to be seen; all that seems certain at the moment is that »the impact of environmental change on migration will increase in the future« (Government Office for Science 2011, p. 9).

These developments have been responded to by affected societies and states, given they had the power to do so. History has seen various forms of facilitating or restricting migration, such as to cities or by people of certain nationalities. However, in the 1880s, new restrictions were introduced, while WWI and widespread protectionism have been identified as »the major watershed« of the rise of comprehensive migration controls in Europe and the US (Lucassen 1998, p. 45). Global, regional, and national policies have responded to these changes in migration; states have set up a whole range of organizations and agencies and have developed new policies and new forms of cooperation, beginning in 1921 with the League of Nations' High Commissioner for Refugees, the Intergovernmental Committee for Refugees in 1936, and the Provisional Intergovernmental Committee for the Movement of Migrants from Europe in 1951. In 1976, the European Community (as it was called then) set up a committee devoted to migration matters for the first time, called the Trevi committee (Bunyan 1993); this was followed in 1986 by the Palma declaration, which combined internal freedom of movement with external border controls as its key principle, and in 1998 the Tampere council conclusions harmonized union policies and imposed its migratory conditions on third countries. On the global level, in 1989, the member states of the then-Intergovernmental Committee for Migration (ICM) changed the organization to the International Organization for Migration (IOM), which in 2016 moved under the umbrella of the United Nations (UN). In recent decades, no »borderless world« emerged (Ohmae 1990); instead, states have been catching up and introducing new forms of controls. Some of these developments have been understood as the »securitization of migration«, the »externalization of migration control« and new types of »bordering processes« (e.g., Huysmans 2000), giving rise to new a type of state that can be labeled the migration security states. This shows that since WWI, migration has been perceived by states in the Global North as the key *problematique* that must be tackled.

2 The Emergence of Migration Studies as a Thriving Field of Research

In conjunction with the dynamics of migration and migration policies, migration studies have greatly expanded over recent decades. Entire cycles, national discourses, and even fashions of research have emerged so that migra-

tion is now a major field of research (Carling et al. 2014). The ›Summer of Migration‹ in 2015 did not trigger but rather boosted this pre-existing trend. Scholarly attention began as early as the late 19th century (see du Bois 1898), took off in the 1930s, and has boomed since the 1980s in the US and in the UK and in continental Europe since the 1990s. Some of the recent rise in Europe has been spurred by the EU framework programs funding research on migration, notably the FP6 and FP7 from 2002. The most recent large-scale influx of migrants and refugees in 2015 and 2016 that was perceived as a ›refugee crisis‹ triggered a fresh wave of research that was facilitated by large sums of funding, mostly from statutory agencies, which enables dense and detailed research.

There are now at least 49 academic migration journals: the oldest, *Race & Class* in the UK, dates back to 1959, and *International Migration Review* was introduced in the US in 1964 (see Pisarevskaya et al. 2020). Furthermore, migration is also covered in the journals of many disciplines, notably sociology, economics, and geography, but also in the journals of various areas of studies. On the institutional side, dedicated migration and ethnic relations research centers were set up, such as the Institute of Race Relations in London in 1958, the Centre for Refugee Studies in Oxford, UK, in 1982, the Institute for Migration Research and Intercultural Studies (IMIS) in 1991 in Osnabrück, Germany, and the Institute for Migration and Ethnic Studies (IMES) in Amsterdam, the Netherlands, in 1994. In 1996, a separate International Association for the Study of Forced Migration (IASFM) was launched; around that time, the H-Migration network was also set up as part of the association H-Net. Contemporary migration studies were consolidated in 2004 with the establishment of the EU-funded network of excellence IMISCOE (International Migration, Integration and Social Cohesion). Initially, the network brought together 19 major European research institutions but has since grown to a network of 55 migration research institutes in Europe, although there are other institutes who are not IMISCOE members. The annual IMISCOE conferences usually attract 400–600 participants; the International Metropolis Conference, established in 1996, gathers 500–900 participants; and the biannual IASFM conferences bring together several hundred participants, as do the migration panels of the European Social Science History (ESSH) conferences. In addition, in 2008, the EU Council established the European Migration Network (EMN), whose annual conferences involve a mix of national and EU bureaucrats, academics, and other stakeholders. These large networks and regular gatherings reflect and acknowledge a process that began in Europe 35–40 years ago.

In addition, the expansion of international organizations such as the International Organization for Migration (IOM), the Organisation for Economic

Cooperation and Development (OECD), the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the International Centre for Migration Policy Development (ICMPD), and the International Labor Organization (ILO), as well as the launch of their annual migration reports and research report series, all began to grow in the early 1970s and were well established by the beginning of the 2000s (SOPEMI in 1973, World Migration Report in 2000). This development is further enhanced by the emergence of think tanks and NGOs that are partly or exclusively concerned with migration or migration policy, such as the European Council of Refugees and Exiles (ECRE) in 1974, the Centre for European Policy Studies (CEPS) in 1983, the Migration Policy Group (MPG) in 1995, the European Policy Centre (EPC) in 1997, and the Platform for International Cooperation (PICUM) in 2001.

However, this expansion comes at a price. Because much research is funded by states, researchers must demonstrate that their research is at least policy-relevant and sometimes even policy-driven. Scholten (2018, p. 300) notes that due to the power of the policy environments »conceptual and methodological developments in migration research have been at least partly constituted by the perspective of nation states« Therefore, the themes, designs, approaches, and definitions of the explanandums are often determined by policy. Castles and Withol de Wenden (2006) criticize this as resulting in narrowly-focused, short-term perspectives that produce simplistic and »methodologically nationalist« results (Wimmer and Glick-Schiller 2002) that are out of context and inappropriate for describing the complexities laid out above. In addition, Pécoud (2015, p. 98) bemoans the ›depoliticising of migration‹ and criticizes many discursive practices that »seem to function like Orwell's newspeak and […] reject the concepts that do not fit into [some actors'] understanding of migration.« This fundamentally shapes the epistemology underlying some migration research. Braun and colleagues (2018, p. 9) pointedly describe this as the »embattled knowledge production on migration.«

3 Conflicting Definitions

It is conventionally assumed that in discussions on ›migration‹ it is clear what is meant: a more-or-less long change of residence from one state to another. Unfortunately, however, this is far from true. In fact, uncertainty and controversy continue to abound as to what migration is and who counts as a migrant (see, e.g., Allen et al. 2018). Administrative, political, and scientific definitions as well as discursive practices are diverse, and these often conflict with one another. This is because migration is also »part of a mobility continuum ranging from occasional travel to permanent relocation« (Willekens et al. 2016, p. 998) and, as revealed below, it proves problematic to

convincingly distinguish among different patterns. Furthermore, migration is a highly politicized and emotional issue, which impacts and shapes science.

For the ILO (2015), a person who works abroad is a migrant worker from the very first day of his or her engagement in work. In contrast, the United Nations defines temporary migrants as persons who are abroad for three months or more and permanent immigrants as persons who are abroad for at least 12 months (UN 1998). Any threshold is inevitably arbitrary and a political and/or administrative construct. The definitions of international organizations are also in stark contrast to the practices of nation-states, which either issue short-term visas for the purpose of a visit (usually for a maximum of 90 days) or longer-term residence permits for purposes of education, employment, business, or family life. However, these are also usually only temporary, perhaps two or three years; a permanent status can only be acquired after an initial temporary stay. Hence, in politics, almost all migration is initially considered temporary. As can be seen, a tension is created between the definitions of international organizations and those of nation-states. Furthermore, in demography and statistics, a distinction is made between stocks and flows, or between individuals residing in another country and individuals entering or leaving; demographic flows also include birth and death.

The member states of the European Union often distinguish between what is denoted as the internal mobility of citizens of other member states and the relocation of citizens from outside the union, or ›third-country nationals‹, with the latter denoted as migration (e.g., European Commission 2018). Politically, movements within states are understood as mobility and movements between states are understood as migration. Some discourses label Westerners in other countries as expatriates, while international students are often not perceived as migrants but instead are placed a separate category; here, the purpose is to avoid the negative connotation the label ›migration‹ often bears. In contrast, the disciplines of sociology, geography, and anthropology do not make such categorical differences but view all as forms of migration.

Apart from such statistical and political definitions, diverging and dynamic individual processes are at stake. On the one hand, what counts a visit, a temporary relocation, a long-term relocation, or a permanent relocation to another country is subject to dynamic individual and collective decision-making processes and changing intentions that are further shaped by dynamic opportunity structures and the respective migration environments. Moreover, the schematic idea of a relocation suggesting that a person is either there or here is undermined by translocal and transnational practices (see below). Consequently, a tension arises between political definitions and often-changing individual practices.

Research often finds that migration is not all the same; instead, if one takes multiple dimensions into account, differences are noted that are often considered significant enough to be a distinct pattern. These are then categorized and assigned a specific label, such as seasonal migration, highly-skilled migration, lifestyle migration, and so on. It is possible that over 50 such types of migration have been identified (see Düvell 2006a).

These political, legal, and administrative and partly-conflicting definitions result in significant confusion and controversies, and they complicate migration studies. While policy and law shape the options of an individual, who might then act within the given constraints, political and legal categories are nevertheless inappropriate for scientific analyses. Bakewell (2008, p. 433) demonstrates that research informed by political categories or driven by considerations of what is perceived »policy relevant« prevents certain research and results in certain types of migration or topics from becoming »invisible«. Lindley (2014, p. 8) thus argues that using »policy categories […] as a starting point for research« is a »weakness of migration studies«. Therefore, science must develop its own terminology and definitions.

4 Theoretical, Conceptual, and Methodological Challenges

So far, there are many more or less integrated migration theories and a plethora of concepts. Amongst the many theories are Classical and Neo-Classical Economics of Migration, the New Economics of Labor Migration, Place Utility theory, Migration System theory, and migration in functionally differentiated social systems, Cumulative Causation theory, theories on social transformation and migration, Migration Network theory, Human Agency theory and the Capability approach. Meanwhile, the older naturalistic and positivist theories of Ravenstein (1885), Thornthwaite (1934), and Lee (1966), along with the related ideas of push-pull models, have been largely discarded (e.g., Radu and Straubhaar 2012). Additionally, some migration researchers consider the utility of Fuzzy Logic (see Lienenkamp 1999), Chaos and Complexity theory, and general non-linearity, non-predictability, and irregularity (see Dauphine 1995; Papastergiadis 2000; Willekens 2012). Frequently, fresh perspectives are added, including the ›mobility turn‹, ›the transnational turn‹, the ›urban turn‹ and ›local turn‹, the ›infrastructural turn‹ the ›materiality turn‹ and others. This also illustrates the many ways by which migration theory has been informed by broader sociological, economic, and philosophical theories and by scholars such as Giddens, Bourdieu, Castells, Sen, Friedman, Polanyi, Bauman, Luhmann, and others.

It has become increasingly common to conduct multi-level analyses, distinguishing between factors on the micro-, meso- and macro levels (e.g., Faist

2000) and conceptualizing these as drivers or better determinants of migration. Macro-level factors are economic, demographic, and climate conditions as well as the political and legal frameworks within which individuals act. Meso-level factors are social structures and organizations that facilitate or restrict migration, notably migration networks and migration infrastructures, such as businesses or NGOs (e.g., Biao and Lindquist 2014). Micro-level factors are located on the level of the individual and refer to characteristics (age, gender), capitals (social, human, cultural, and financial), and cognitive processes (imaginations, perceptions, risk behavior, etc.). This distinction is an important step in theory formation, as it acknowledges the importance of the interplay of diverse factors. Accordingly, it has been acknowledged that macro-level factors only represent opportunity structures but do not explain individual behavior, and that individual cognitive processes explain individual behavior in conjunction with factors on the meso-level that shape the capability to actually migrate. This triad thus integrates structure and human agency into one model. A cross-cutting theme is opportunity/constraint structures insofar as both opportunities and constraints are found on all three levels, such as political restrictions, lack of travel infrastructures, or financial capital.

Some key concepts that have recently been applied to better understand contemporary migration (e.g., Bartram et al. 2014) and triggered productive cycles of research are: forced (internal and international) migration, mixed migration, south-south migration, irregular migration and transit migration, transnationalism, journeys, decision-making processes, super-diversity, climate-change induced migration, the feminization of migration, and migration networks and diasporas together with the migration-and-development nexus, including remittances. However, some of these concepts are rather cycles or fashions of conceptual lenses, and one should neither over-apply new ideas nor easily discard older concepts.

Still, despite these highly dynamic and innovative advances, most theories are only short-range (e.g., Castles 2010), and there is no one single grand theory (Willekens et al. 2016). Most theories display a severe limitation in that they only explain one variation of human behavior in space – mobility – but not another (sedentariness). In addition, the range and complexity of the interactions among migration drivers means that it is rarely possible to identify individuals for whom one factor is the sole driver and thus neatly determine ›labor migrants‹, ›lifestyle migrants‹, ›refugees‹, or ›environmental migrants‹ (slightly rephrased from Government Office for Science 2011, p. 9). Due to the problems with all of these theories and concepts, important reflexive epistemological processes are triggered, critically (re)framing the often mixed motivations that generate rather mixed flows.

Furthermore, the methodological challenges of migration studies are plenty, because the object of migration studies is a specific one. Migration is a highly fluid phenomenon that constantly displays new features, as described above. The subject is not clearly defined and delineated; scientists are confronted with »moving targets« (Penninx 2013). Often, migrants and refugees are legally excluded, racially discriminated against, and socially vulnerable. This is further reinforced by the fact that international migrants are only a small group of society, and they are often hard to find, hard to reach, and a hidden population (Vigneswaran and Quirk 2012). The actions and interactions of drivers and *all* actors – notably individuals, groups, institutions, and organizations – represent a »complexity« that is hard to pinpoint (Willekens 2012). Finally, migration is an emotional and political issue, obscured by misperceptions and misunderstandings.

Migration studies have thus developed some specific methods and methodologies (Vargas-Silva 2012) as well as research ethics (European Commission [no date]; Düvell et al. 2010). Furthermore, studies on categories such as refugees, irregular migrants, or transit migrants each require additional adjustments. Such studies have also recognized that research in the Global South may require more methodological fine-tuning (Berriane and Haas 2012a, p. xx). Important advances include multi-sited research applied to transnational subjects, mobile ethnographies applied to people on the move (Marcus 1995), and serial research conducted with the same group or at the same site, as well as mixed-method designs. Meanwhile, comparative studies have long been an exception (Bloemraad 2013).

With respect to administrative data, public statistics, and research data, information is lacking (e.g., Bertoli 2016; Willekens et al. 2016). Most data exist in the northern OECD countries, whereas data on, e.g., South America or Africa is unreliable or rests on divergent definitions and is thus not comparable. Generally, research in migrants' countries of origin is rare (see Berriane and Haas 2012b), and so far, many studies are qualitative case studies and are based on small samples. Often, data only becomes available with a significant time lap. Emigration data is also largely absent (Willekens et al. 2016), in that transnational practices cannot be accounted for with conventional administrative practices. Irregular migration, which represents up to a fifth of all migration, can only be estimated or even guessed. However, migrants also leave more and more traces on social media, such as Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, Instagram, as well as by Google searches or mobile phone usage, which represent entirely new date sources. Therefore, considering the potential of big (social network) data has gained some prominence; however, it seems that so far, mostly EU and UN agencies who are often associated

with controlling migration have experimented with such data sources (e.g., IOM 2019).

Willekens et al. (2016, p. 898) come to the pessimistic conclusion that »migration research is not very well equipped to address international migration in its complexity. The field is fragmented across disciplines and within disciplines. Economists, sociologists, geographers, anthropologists and political scientists use different theories and different approaches to the study of migration with little overlap«.

5 Distortions and Biases in Migration Research

Migration studies are haunted by a frustrating range of biases. First and foremost, what is considered ›migration‹ and what is considered ›mobility‹ depends on political and legal definitions (see above); therefore, the category of migration is essentially a political construct. While in anthropological terms any movement in time and space qualifies as migration, in political terms only certain movements across the borders of nation-states are constructed as migration. The same applies to who is considered a refugee, which is based on a process of political and administrative labeling (Zetter 1991). Second, conventionally, it is taken for granted that migration is a social problem or explanandum which is supposed to require an explanation (see Berger and Luckmann 1966; Spector and Kitsuse 1977). This is a reductionism (Bourdieu 1986) that solely focuses on an individual's behavior in space and the kind of one-sided perspective that Bourdieu criticizes in his reflexive sociology. However, by way of a reframing exercise, one could as well take as explanandum the political organizations of humanity in nation-states or ask why societies struggle to accommodate mobile people. As a consequence, movements within states, before or after international migration, and the shortcomings of the receiving societies are less focused on in migration research.

This one-sided, problem-oriented perspective encompasses a whole range of biases, such as a national bias, a geographical bias, a receiving country bias, an urban bias, a historical bias, a class bias, an ethnic bias, a gender bias, an integration bias, and a mobility bias. This means that: (a) a few countries are studied extensively, while little is known about others; (b) most migration research focuses on affluent destination countries, while much less is known about migration within Eurasia, Africa, South Asia, or South America; (c) matters between departure and arrival (notably travel, journeys, and trajectories) are obscured from the scientific eye; (d) most migration studies focus on urban environments, often even only capital cities, and neglect smaller cities, towns, and rural areas; (e) research often neglects the historical

context; (f) migration of the rich is rarely studied; (g) certain dominant nationalities and ethnicities are over-researched (e.g., Turks or Muslims in Germany), while others are under-researched; (h) female agents still often remain invisible, as do families and children; (i) most of what is called ›migration research‹ is actually integration research; and (j) immobility is perceived as a non-phenomenon and is usually neglected. Some of these biases are criticized for reflecting »methodological nationalism« (Wimmer and Glick-Schiller 2002), for being »Eurocentric« (Amelina and Horvath 2017), or for narrowly focusing on the receiving context and on integration (Dahinden 2016). Postcolonial approaches emphasize the importance of the »critical aftermath« of colonialism – i.e., the continuing heritage of colonialism – and any trend that renders the subjects of migration invisible (Nair 2013).

Furthermore, academic and related popular discourses are plagued by false dichotomies or binaries, including migration/immobility, political/economic, forced/voluntary, legal/illegal, short-term/long-term, migrant/indigenous, high-skilled/low-skilled, minor/adult, and sending country/receiving country; related rigid categories include labor migrants, refugees, unaccompanied minors, etc. These simple migration dichotomies are usually closely related to other social dichotomies, such as developed/developing, rich/poor, or center countries/periphery countries. Such practices are informed by European and Anglo-Saxon scientific, philosophical, and essentially positivist traditions, notably Leibniz's mathematical concept of binaries, Hegel's interpretation of dialectics, and Parsons's schematic understanding of the functioning of society (for a critique, see, e.g., Bourdieu in Wacquant 1989; Meszaros 2009). Therefore, many scholars have queried such black-and-white thinking and instead have demonstrated that: (a) economic migration is also political; (b) forced or voluntary migration also occurs on a scale depending on the level of coercion (and even refugees usually display some level of human agency) (Van Hear et al. 2009); (c) legal status occurs on a scale and there are phenomena such as quasi-legality (e.g., Kubal 2012); (d) many countries are simultaneously a sending country and a receiving country (e.g., IOM 2003) and there are more and more in-between countries, or countries of transit (e.g., Düvell et al. 2014); (e) individuals change their status; (f) countries change their role in the migration order and undergo migration transitions (Skeldon 2012); or (g) that migration can be a continuum involving more than two countries, and it is more than a simple movement from A to B but rather can involve serial migration (Ossman 2013) or transnational practices (e.g., Faist 2000), bringing about diaspora and hybrid identities (e.g., Cohen 1997).

The same is the case for rigid categories. With regard to labor, forced migration, and other types of migration, sociologists have frequently demon-

strated that mobile people have rather mixed motivations and that rigid ascriptions are politically constructed and unsuitable for capturing the incredibly complex realities of human lives (Van Hear et al. 2009; Crawley and Skleparis 2018). Such rigid categories also fail to account for changes in an individual's situation – for example, when refugees begin working and become workers. Moreover, types such as child migrants have been deconstructed: »anthropologists have long debunked theoretical models that see it [childhood] as a ›natural‹ or universal developmental state. Instead, they have convincingly shown that youth and childhood are largely socially and culturally constructed categories« that diverge across space, change over time, and have been understood differently throughout history (Lems et al. 2019). The same applies to other types, states, or dimensions of social being.

Similar rigid categories include ideas such as ›Polish migrants‹, ›Syrian refugees‹, ›Kurdish refugees‹, ›Muslims‹ and so on. In this case, nationality, ethnicity, or religion are applied as markers of identity; according, seemingly-homogenous categories are constructed. However, these erase important class, gender, ethnic, religious, and political differences. In this way, ›Polish IT experts‹ and ›Polish domestic workers‹ who are at different ends of the class hierarchy are subsumed under one label as ›Polish migrants‹ even though the Polish IT expert probably has more in common with a Greek professional counterpart. Syrian, Iraqi, Afghan, Somali, and other refugees often turn out to be minorities in their country of origin, such as Kurds, Yazidi, Hazaras, Sunni, etc., and those who are described as Pakistani migrants may be members of the persecuted Christian minority.

Finally, in some countries (including Germany), migration studies are predominantly integration studies. That is unfortunate, as it conflates two distinctly different social fields: the actual process of migration, and the subsequent processes of cohabitation. This is another expression of methodological nationalism and Eurocentrism insofar as it leads to systematic neglect of matters outside of European nation-states.

As a result of these often-Western »epistemological practices« (Maffie 2005), the research of migration is strangely two-dimensional and limited to two variables: policy – the crossing of international borders, and time – the duration of a single stay in another country. This is a fairly normative perspective that neglects social, cultural, and geographical dimensions. This neglect obscures the many other dimensions that shape the type of mobility. For instance, it neglects the historical dimension, including the historic links between countries. Ignoring the spatial dimension neglects geography and distance and whether migration is between neighboring countries, countries of the same region, or countries on different continents. Disregarding the cultural dimension neglects whether migrants share the same or similar cul-

tures, languages, and religions with the host societies. As a result, for example, migration from Australia to the UK is labeled the same as migration from Nigeria to China, as politically both are subject to immigration controls and visa requirements. Interestingly, though, in the Eurasian context, a difference is made between migration to Russia from ›near-abroad‹ and ›far-abroad‹ countries; this takes into account not only geography – migration from neighboring or regional countries – but also history – migration from former Soviet Union states (e.g., Ivakhnyuk 2005).

Many of these distortions and biases are a consequence of a simplified understanding of space and time as linear dimensions, which reduces migration into a simple geographical and temporal movement from one place or geographical coordinate in the past to another in the present.

6 Some Cornerstones of Reflexive Migration Studies

After the critical assessment of the various biases, distortions, and limitations in the previous section, this section lays out a set of approaches that could contribute to shaping a way to think differently about and produce knowledge on migration. These approaches are drawn from migration policy studies and discourse studies, research on wider social and historical processes, the positionality of those who produce knowledge, and normative thinking concerned with the meaning of migration.

On the one hand, much research on migration, migration policy, and public attitudes focuses on the often hostile responses. Studies have found that since the mid-1990s, migration has increasingly been perceived as a security threat as well as a threat to state sovereignty, border controls, social cohesion, and public order. This, the argument goes, triggered a mixture of extraordinary internal and external control policies and politics, including a »militarization« of border controls (Lutterbeck 2006) that were analyzed as the »securitization of migration« (e.g., Huysmans 2000). These policies, as Feldman (2011) shows, culminate in an assemblage of discourses, institutions, and practices that infiltrates migration research. This approach clearly depicts part of the environment within which migration studies operate and exposes the discursive and political power of the ›sedentary bias‹ of which scientists must be aware.

In contrast, some leading contemporary economists seem to be primarily positive towards migration: »migrants advance societies« Goldin et al. (2018, p. 17) argue. For instance, studies have acknowledged that immigration drives economic growth and innovations (Goldin et al. 2018, p. 17). Furthermore, the mobility of skills is no longer simplified as brain drain but is understood in a more nuanced fashion as a mix of drain and gain processes in

the countries of origin (Boeri et al. 2012). In particular, research on the various types of remittances – financial, social, political, and cultural – and on what is labeled the migration-development nexus – the role of remittances as a driver of development – have turned out to be extremely productive (Geiger and Pécoud 2013). It is now widely agreed that in general, »migration is conducive to native and aggregate prosperity, especially over longer time frames«, but that »the associated distributional effects of this may be uneven« (Pitt 2018, p. 7) across social classes, genders, and regions. This suggests that a key theme is the highly sensitive issue of distributional (in-)justice. Generally, many contemporary economists no longer perceive migration as a problem or threat, as some neoclassical scholars did (e.g., Borjas 2003); instead, Goldin et al. (2018, p. 17) perceive anti-immigration attitudes as the problem to be explained and addressed, insisting that »migration has defined humanity« and thus seek to normalize the phenomenon.

Historical studies reveal that human beings have been migrating for as long as they have existed; like sociological studies, they often consider migration in the context of social transformations, such as epochal changes, industrial revolution, or political turmoil. This indicates that migration is an inherent feature of humankind and human progress and thus is not an exception but the normality (e.g., Kubat and Hoffmann-Nowotny 1981; Hoerder 2002). Castles (2010, p. 1565) directly suggests going beyond the narrow focus on migration and proposes that a »conceptual framework for migration studies should take social transformation as its central category, in order to facilitate understanding of the complexity, interconnectedness, variability, contextuality and multi-level mediations of migratory processes in the context of rapid global change« and exhorts researchers to »analyse the dynamics of migration, not in isolation, but as a part of complex and varied processes of societal change« (Castles 2010, p. 1568; also see Solimanos 2010). Here, social change refers to the reconfiguration of most social patterns (employment, family life, consumption, political organization, communication, etc.; see, e.g., Bauman 2000) and the »increasingly universal relationships of power and inequality« (Castles 2010, p. 1576). This approach is further reinforced by the »normalization of mobility« in the era of globalization (Cresswell 2001; Jeffery and Murison 2011). It requires not studying migration as a separate phenomenon but normalizing and mainstreaming migration – »conceptualised as an alternative approach which does promise to capture complexity« (Scholten 2020, p. 121) – in the social sciences.

Furthermore, acknowledging the pitfalls of eurocentrism and the general dominance of scholars from the Global North, thereby querying the impact of scholars' positionality, »has become increasingly mainstream«, Fiddian-Qasmiyeh (2020, p. 1) believes. She suggests »recentering the South«; howev-

er, in migration studies this might not go far enough to address the many biases and distortions exposed herein. More radically, Grosfoguel et al. (2015, p. 646) appeal for an »epistemic decolonization of migration theory«, and Nair (2013) suggests theorizing migration instead through a postcolonial lens. Such an approach, she argues, »brings to light the crucial question of persisting empire in the age of globalisation«. Because most migration is from postcolonial countries, essentially »the postcolonial is about dislocation«, as greater possibilities for ›voluntary mobilities‹ and transnational lives enabled by economic development and expansion, as well as ›involuntary‹ displacements, are a reaction to civic conflict and environmental degradation. The focus on displacement also brings attention to broader sociopolitical issues seen from the migrant's perspective, »as opposed to the perspective of the national, the settled, or the established« (p. 2456). Notably, the ›migrant's perspective‹ has the potential to reframe research questions and guide future knowledge production.

Finally, Moulier-Boutang (1998) was among the first to highlight the political meaning of migration as the »autonomy of migration«, an analogy to the concept of a worker autonomy put forth by post-Marxists such as Tronti, Negri, Cleaver, Hartmann, and others. The reference to ›autonomy‹ suggests that the meaning of migration is to be understood in the context of capitalism and class struggle and thus as a form of claims-making, which echoes earlier notions of migration as an ›exit‹ strategy and an expression of discontent (Hirschman 1970). Since then, a number of authors have demonstrated that at least some migration is a kind of protest – ›voting by one's feet‹–against certain economic or political conditions and a kind of social movement for participation and social justice. This school of thought challenges the notion that migration is simply functional for society, economy, and subsequently capitalism, but argues that it should be understood within the context of social inequality. The takeaway from this is that the scientific production of knowledge on migration should recognize the stratification of society and thus the political meaning(s) of migration or sedentariness.

7 Conclusion: Elements of a New Migratory Epistemology

This article demonstrates that the understanding of the object of research – migration – is often based on contestable definitions constructed on arbitrary thresholds and assumptions and is often derived from methodologically nationalist research designs. It also illustrates that the definition of the explanandum is based on a one-sided approach that is reductionist and biased. Furthermore, the article shows that so far »migration research is not very well equipped to address international migration in its complexity« (Wille-

kens et al. 2016, p. 898). Finally, it demonstrates that migration is treated as *a priori* knowledge, which it is not. Migration studies should understand migration not merely in technical terms but also in a phenomenological social sense, in looking at »conscious experience as experienced from the subjective or first-person point of view« and »the meaning things have« in their experiences (Smith 2018, p. 1). This would effectively challenge the power of the authors of the Global North to define matters. In the same vein, migration studies should ask how migration comes about, conduct multiple-level analyses, and take multiple perspectives. Scholars should conduct *a posteriori* investigation and unending analyses to overcome the often-applied but short-sighted snapshot approaches. This is important, as migration is more than a series of single events and instead is a process (Silvey and Lawson 1999) embedded in other, broader processes, notably social transformation.

With the rise of post-, neo-, or liquid modernity and at the outset of yet another industrial revolution, future migration is certainly not new in kind but rather new in character (Hoerder 2002). Thus, it is deeply intertwined with contemporary social, political, and post-colonial inequalities; ongoing social transformations; processes of globalization; and changes of the global migration order (Van Hear 1998) involving a whole host of actors (Willekens 2010). Therefore, migration studies need to engage with the multiple dimensions and the complexity of this field. In order to achieve this, migration scholars must: (i) strive more persistently to understand the meaning of migration from a transnational perspective in the context of social hierarchies, class, gender, race, and diverse intersectionalities; (ii) acknowledge the full scope of the mobility continuum, which ranges from immobility to temporary migration and permanent emigration; and (iii) recognize that the complexity of human behavior in space and time represents a complex (im-) mobility system of drivers, actors, their attributes, different life stages, different experiences, and interactions (also see Leloup 1996).

Some of the problems discussed here result from an »analytic disposition that is part of, formed in and by, the ›collective unconscious‹ of an academic field. This field structures modes and conventions of thinking within itself« (Kenway and McLeod 2004, p. 528 on Bourdieu). Therefore, migration scholars should reflect on three challenges. First, because migration is such a contested topic, scientists should reflect on the impact of public and political discourses on their work while also taking into account the ethics of migration and migration policy (see Carens 1987, 2013; Barry and Goodin 1992; and others). Second, critical reflections are needed on the political nature of research and whether it is fundamental, policy-relevant, or even policy-driven research; whose interests it serves; and whether it benefits or harms migrants. The third type of reflections should be devoted to the »social origin of the

researchers« and their »scholastic point of view« (Kenway and McLeod 2004, p. 528).

The argument made here follows Bourdieu's reflexive sociology, notably its efforts to transcend binary thinking, its rejection of a simple positivist model, and its critique of the linguistic practices of research, notably »the occupational taxonomies, names of groups, [and] concept« and the »formidable epistemological obstacles« these represent (Bourdieu in Wacquant 1989, p. 54). Many of the critical studies discussed here represent an epistemology similar to postcolonial, feminist, or generally social epistemologies (see Goldman and Blanchard 2018). These could be understood as a specific migratory epistemology based on an acknowledgement of the mobility continuum that views immobility, mobility, and migration as categories of epistemic analysis and that queries and deconstructs the assumptions, conventions, dichotomies, and categories that are largely the result of sedentary and thus methodologically nationalist biases. However, the implication here is not to debunk all structuralization and conventional epistemology but rather to overcome biases, to develop alternative parameters and systems of references, and to develop a purely scientific system of typologies that reflects the multiple dimensions of (im-)mobility and a cosmopolitan methodology and thereby strive for a less biased representation. This requires a critical, phenomenological notion of migration that takes a »first person point of view« (as elaborated above), abstaining from a synchronic abstract understanding of migration as events and instead developing a diachronic concept (e.g., Hoerder 2002) of (im-)mobility and sedentarism/migration as processes. Reflexive or critical migration studies, along with many of the scholars cited here, have already moved in this direction.

Accordingly, I suggest building on these critical studies and attempting a migratory epistemology and philosophy of science to study the ways in which the (im-)mobility characteristics of individuals do and ought to influence our conceptions of knowledge, the knowing subject, and practices of inquiry and justification – in other words, the way we think about (im-)mobility. In this way, researchers can identify how dominant conceptions and practices of knowledge attribution, acquisition, and justification systematically disadvantage migrants; then, researchers can strive to reform these conceptions and practices so that they also reflect the interests of this group.[4] Key to such an approach would be: (a) acknowledging that humanity is as much a sedentary as a migratory species; (b) thus discarding the idea that mobility/immobility is a dichotomy and instead acknowledge that it is a continuum; (c) engaging as much as possible not only in internationally comparative but

4 This and the previous sentence have been paraphrased from Anderson 2020.

also transnational approaches; (d) accepting the diachronic nature of aspirations, motivations, and according migration categories; (e) acknowledging the complexity of structures and actors and their dynamic interactions; (f) developing and defending a fine-tuned tool box of scientific typologies against simplified administrative and legal constructions; and (g) (re-) politicizing migration studies in an enlightening and emancipatory sense.[5]

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5 But »without falling into the traditional over-politicisation of migration«, Pécoud 2015, p. 126.

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