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# The Politics of (Non)Knowledge in the (Un)Making of Migration

## Abstract

In the past decade, constructivist understandings of migration have gained momentum in migration studies. Scholars have shown how (some) people are enacted as ›migrants‹ when human mobility clashes with nation-states' claimed prerogative to control »the legitimate means of movement« (Torpey). Another body of scholarship has highlighted the crucial role played by knowledge practices in the enactment of migration as an intelligible object of government. However, these two lines of inquiry have largely been conducted independently of each other. To better account for how practices of border control affect the production of knowledge about migration and how the latter, in turn, informs practices and rationales of migration management, this article asks: How can we conceptualize and empirically investigate the relationship between enacting migration through knowledge practices and enacting migrants through practices of bordering? In response to this question, I propose a sociology of translation and treason in the tradition of the Actor-Network Theory (ANT), which enables tracing how records produced in border encounters are translated into not only ›migration facts‹ but also various forms of nonknowledge. To demonstrate the analytical potential of this approach, I show how statistical knowledge about the ›deportation gap‹ – often invoked to justify ever-more restrictive measures in the field of return policy – is, to a significant extent, a result of the mistranslation of returned migrants in administrative records used for migration statistics.

## Keywords

Epistemology, borders, ignorance, migration management, performativity, statistics

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## Zur Politik des (Nicht-)Wissens in der Herstellung/ dem Rückgängigmachen von Migration

### Zusammenfassung

In den letzten Jahren haben konstruktivistische Ansätze in der Migrationsforschung an Bedeutung gewonnen. Zahlreiche Forscher\*innen haben gezeigt, wie einige Subjekte zu Migranten gemacht werden, wenn Mobilität mit dem von Nationalstaaten beanspruchten Recht kollidiert, »die legitimen Mittel der Bewegung« (Torpey) zu kontrollieren. Ein zweiter Forschungsbereich hat die Rolle von Wissenspraktiken bei der Konstitution von Migration als einem Objekt des Regierens aufgezeigt. Bislang wurden diese beiden Forschungsrichtungen zumeist unabhängig voneinander betrieben. Um besser zu verstehen, wie Praktiken der Grenzkontrolle die Produktion von Wissen über Migration beeinflussen, und wie Letztere Praktiken und Logiken des Grenz- und Migrationsmanagements prägt, fragt dieser Artikel: Wie lässt sich die Beziehung zwischen der Konstituierung von Migration als einem Objekt des Regierens durch Wissensproduktion und die Konstitution von Migrant\*innen durch Praktiken der Grenzkontrolle theoretisch denken und empirisch erforschen? Hierfür wird eine Soziologie der Übersetzung und des Betrugs in Tradition der Akteur-Netzwerk-Theorie (ANT) vorgeschlagen. Dieser Ansatz erlaubt es zu untersuchen, wie administrative Daten, die Begegnungen zwischen mobilen Subjekten und Akteuren der Grenzkontrolle generiert werden, in Fakten bzw. in Nicht-Wissen über Migration übersetzt werden. Um das analytische Potenzial dieses Ansatzes zu demonstrieren, zeige ich, wie statistisches Wissen über den »deportation gap«, der häufig bemüht wird, um restriktivere Maßnahmen im Bereich der Rückkehrpolitik zu legitimieren, zu einem signifikanten Teil auf der Nicht-Übersetzung von remigrierten Migrant\*innen in administrative Daten beruht, die für die Produktion von Migrationsstatistiken genutzt werden.<sup>1</sup>

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## Schlagwörter

Epistemologie, Grenzen, Nichtwissen, Migrationsmanagement, Performativität, Statistiken

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## 1 Introduction

Since the early 2000s, migration has featured prominently on the political agenda in Europe and beyond. How many people immigrate in a given year and the question of how to regulate migration can decide elections or even shape the future of the European Union (EU), as recently demonstrated by the vote for Brexit in the UK (Goodwin and Milazzo 2017). In spite of the ongoing politicization of migration, the knowledge practices that are mobilized to constitute migrations as intelligible and actionable objects of policy-making and government interventions have received little scholarly attention thus far.<sup>2</sup> This relative neglect is surprising, considering the intensification of related efforts by state actors, think tanks, NGOs, activist networks, and other stakeholders in the contested policy arena of migration governance. Such migration-related knowledge practices include migration statistics, their circulation in graphs and charts, the registration of migrants in increasingly interconnected databases, projections of future migration flows, and the visualization of migration routes used by illegalized migrants, such as in the infamous i-Map of the International Centre for Migration Policy Development (ICMPD) (see Figure 1). The practices also include the production of ›counter knowledge‹ (Braun et al. 2018) by critical NGOs, scholars, and activist networks, such as the documentation of push-backs and border violence (e.g., Heller and Pezzani 2014), statistics on migrants who have died on their way to Europe (e.g., Last et al. 2017), a critique of the dominant production of images about migration (e.g., Hess 2012), and attempts of ›counter-mapping‹ (e.g., Casas-Cortés and Cobarrubias 2018).

These contested politics of knowledge production are animated, on the one hand, by the mantra of evidence-based policymaking in the field of migration management (e.g., ICMPD 2013) and related calls for better data for better policy (e.g., Willekens et al. 2016). On the other hand, critical scholars, NGOs, and activists assume that the production of knowledge about migra-

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<sup>2</sup> Of course, some notable exceptions to this observation exist. Recent publications include a special issue on the role of data practices in the enactment of migration (Scheel et al. 2019) and another one in the journal *movements – Journal for Critical Border and Migration Studies* on ›contested knowledge production about migration‹ (Braun et al. 2018).

tion informs not only related political debates and strategies of government but also our very understanding of what migration is.<sup>3</sup> »[F]rom an epistemic point of view, migration does not exist independently of the concepts, definitions, methods, statistics, visualizations and various other data practices that are mobilized to produce knowledge on migration for the purposes of its ›management‹« (Scheel et al. 2019, p. 579). Instead, migration is an abstraction that refers to the decisions, practices, and movements of scores of people who move and crisscross national dividing lines in various ways and for various reasons and timespans. Thus, migration is not a reality ›out there‹ to which policymakers and other stakeholders in the contested politics of border and migration management have direct access; rather, what is known, negotiated, and targeted as migration is mediated by a plethora of knowledge practices that rely on various information technologies, inscription devices, definitions, bodies of expertise, categorizations, and so forth.

The crucial point is that different knowledge practices – that is, different methods of knowing migration – will enact different versions of migration, which will in turn affect the calculations and interventions of government that are mobilized to regulate migration. Statisticians have also observed that knowledge practices perform the object to which they refer in particular ways, as the following quote illustrates: »In many countries, the definition of migration is determined by the way migration is measured« (Willekens 1994, p. 8). This illustrates that the »politics of international migration management« (Geiger and Pécoud 2010) do not only take place at the offices of the European Commission (EC) in Brussels, the headquarters of the International Organization for Migration (IOM) in Geneva, or the conference of Germany's ministers of interior: they also happen at universities, statistical offices, think tanks, research departments of border agencies, and all other sites where knowledge about migration is produced. Therefore – and this is one of the article's central arguments – the politics of international migration management are intertwined with a politics of (non)knowledge that shape not only the calculations and practices of contemporary border and migration management, but also our very understanding of what migration is.

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3 For instance, the *Network for Critical Migration and Border Regime Research* (kritnet.org), founded in 2008, has been promoting an alternative mode of knowledge production on migration for over a decade. It endorses »the right to migration and escape [...] as the central epistemic and political maxim« for research (Kasperek and Hess 2010, p. 13) and seeks to counter the multifarious entanglements of academic knowledge production with the actors, methods, and rationales of border and mobility control (cf. kritnet.org).

Figure 1: Section of the i-Map of the ICMPD showing the Eastern Mediterranean Route



Source: ICMPD.

To better account for the performativity of knowledge practices and their implications for the practices and logics of border and migration management, this article develops a conceptual framework and a related research agenda that revolves around what I call the politics of (non)knowledge in the (un)making of migration. In brief, this line of research is concerned with two interrelated questions: first, how migration is enacted as an intelligible object of government through the production of knowledge as well as various types of nonknowledge; second, how these various and sometimes conflicting enactments of migration inform and shape migration-related policies, logics, and practices of government. In conceptual terms, the article mobilizes two approaches from the field of Science and Technology Studies (STS), albeit in modified form. For the first approach, the article draws on material-semiotic approaches and the notion of enactment to account for the performativity of knowledge practices and practices of bordering (Law 2009; Mol 2002). It complements this approach with insights from agnotology (Proctor 2008) and the sociology of ignorance (Gross and McGoey 2015b) to examine how the production and circulation of various types of nonknowledge – such as doubt, uncertainty, »strategic unknowns« (McGoey 2012), secrecy (Walters 2020), or »undone science« (Hess 2015) – feature in the enactment of migra-

tion as an intelligible object of government. For the second approach, the article mobilizes a sociology of translation (Callon 1986b) in the tradition of Actor-Network Theory (ANT) to trace how administrative records as well as instances of non-recording are converted, via a chain of translations and modifications, into ›facts‹ about migration. I complement this second approach with a vocabulary of treason (Galis and Lee 2014), to better account for instances of betrayal, struggle, subversion, mistranslation, and so forth. This is particularly relevant in the context of border and migration management, where the production, processing, and circulation of administrative records and knowledge for purposes of regulation and control are not always in the interest of the people who are enacted and targeted as migrants.

To develop this analytical framework, the article engages with a question that is raised when one confronts the performativity of knowledge practices with a »relational understanding« (Mecheril et al. 2013, p. 7) of migration, as is promoted by critical and reflexive migration studies (e.g., Amelina 2020; Bojadžijev and Römhild 2014; Casas-Cortes et al. 2015; Dahinden 2016; Favell 2007; Karakayali and Rigo 2010; Nieswand and Drotbohm 2014; Scheel 2013; Schwenken 2018; Tazzioli 2020). In this perspective, migration and the bordering practices of nation-states are co-constitutive. To establish and reproduce itself as a (bounded) people, territory, and jurisdiction, the nation-state constantly draws and polices clear-cut demarcation lines between those who belong to the national citizenry and those who do not (Favell 2007; Sayad 2004). Nicholas De Genova aptly summarizes this observation as follows: »it is the bordered definition of state territoriality that constitutes particular forms *and* expressions of human mobility as ›migration‹ and classifies specific kinds of people who move as ›migrants‹. *Borders make migrants*« (De Genova 2015, p. 4; emphasis in original).

Such an understanding of migration raises an important question for any inquiry into the politics of (non)knowledge in the (un)making of migration: if knowledge practices enact migration as an intelligible object of government, and bordering practices of nation-states enact (some) people as migrants, how we can theorize and study the relationship between the two? Addressing this question is important because it enables teasing out how practices of bordering and migration management affect the production of (non)knowledge about migration and how the latter, in turn, shapes the strategies and practices of government aimed at the regulation and control of migration.

To engage with this question, this article proceeds in four sections. First, I explain how the notion of enactment introduces a praxeological, material-semiotic approach that allows us to study borders and migration as co-constitutive, relational phenomena. The first section focuses on the enactment of migration through the production of (non)knowledge, while the second sec-

tion attends to the enactment of migrants through practices of bordering. The third section introduces a sociology of translation and treason as a viable approach to theorizing the relationship between the enactment of migration as an intelligible object of government through knowledge practices and the enactment of people as migrants through practices of bordering. The fourth section illustrates the analytical potential of this approach, showing how the so-called »deportation gap« (Gibney and Hansen 2003) – the discrepancy between the number of people issued with a deportation order and the number of people who are actually deported or voluntarily leave – is, to a significant extent, the result of a mistranslation of returned migrants into administrative records used for migration statistics.

## 2 Migration and the Production of (Non)Knowledge

Nation-states' attempts to control and regulate cross-border mobility are heavily intertwined with knowledge production about migration. The impetus of nation-states to regulate human mobility stems from several interrelated factors, including the need to create a legible population (Scott 1999), the »discovery« of the population as a source of wealth (Foucault 2007), and the conception of the authorization to »control the legitimate means of movement« (Torpey 1998) as a marker of the sovereignty of the modern nation-state. Since governing hinges on knowing what is to be regulated, the state's impetus to control and regulate human mobility has fueled an unquenchable thirst for knowledge about human mobility and particularly cross-border mobility, understood as migration (cf. Braun et al. 2018; Garelli and Tazzioli 2013; Stierl 2020).

Two sets of knowledge practices seem to be particularly important to enacting migration as an intelligible object of government: quantification practices (especially statistics represented in charts and graphs) and practices of visualization (often resulting in maps depicting stocks and flows of migrants) (Casas-Cortes and Cobarrubias 2018; Methmann and Rothe 2014; Scheel and Ustek-Spilda 2019; Schwenken 2018; Takle 2017; Tazzioli and Walters 2016; Van Reekum and Schinkel 2017). Other scholars have highlighted the importance of the categories used to classify migrants (e.g., Dahinden et al. 2020; Grommé and Scheel 2020; Horvath 2019; Supik and Spielhaus 2019; Stricker 2019) and the discursive formations constituting migration as a problem of government. For instance, members of the research group *Transit Migration* have shown how refugee protection and anti-trafficking discourses victimize certain migrants as a way to justify border controls as means of serving as their protection (Hess and Karakayali 2007; cf. Andrijasevic 2007; Scheel and Ratfisch 2014). The notion of the migration regime highlights the

co-constitution of particular forms and types of migration and the attempts of governments to control and regulate them (Hess and Karakayali 2007). Thus, the notion of the migration regime implies an expansion of the analytical focus, from the study of ›migrants‹ or ›migration‹, understood as readily-available objects of research, to the study of the »production of migration« (Pott et al. 2018, p. 6) – that is, the discourses, practices of bordering, laws, citizenship regimes, knowledge practices, architectural sites, infrastructures, and more through which some people are enacted as migrants. In this vein, dominant categorizations of migration policy discourse – such as ›guest worker‹, ›(bogus) asylum seeker‹, or ›illegal migrant‹ – are understood as expressions of particular relations of migration and related configurations of migration policy, rather than as descriptors of particular groups of migrants sharing distinct features (Karakayali and Rigo 2010).

Despite this impressive, constantly-growing body of scholarship, many works in migration studies – and, to a certain extent, critical and reflexive migration studies as well – still entertain either a realist or a representationalist ontology, both of which assume an external migration-reality that pre-exists the methods, devices, and practices used to know it. A realist ontology suggests that this external migration-reality is more or less accurately represented by knowledge practices like statistics or particular categorizations of migratory movements, thereby reducing criticism of knowledge production about migration to debates on accuracy and adequacy. Social constructivists, for their part, often embrace an epistemological relativism, assuming that different discourses, theoretical perspectives, and other practices of meaning-making create different regimes of truth about the same phenomenon. The problem with these ontologies is that they do not account for the performativity of knowledge practices and of related political implications. Consequently, the potential of these scholars to criticize knowledge practices is either limited to questions of accuracy and adequacy (realism) or to analyses questioning the power effects of hegemonic discourses (representationalism), which are often dismissed as equally interested, power-laden practices of meaning-making (cf. Breeze 2011; Hammersley 2003).

Material-semiotic approaches and the related notion of enactment offer a solution to this conundrum. What is key to material-semiotic approaches is that they focus the analysis on practices that are conceived as sociotechnical, relational, and performative (Law 2009). The reason for this analytical focus on practices is that material-semiotic approaches do not assume pre-existing entities as the starting points of research; rather, they start from the premise that realities are the effect of complex, fragile sociotechnical networks and that these realities only hold as long as the webs of relations that bring them into being »are enacted, enacted again, and enacted yet again – which may or



not may happen in practice« (Law 2008, p. 635). Instead of different perspectives, more-or-less accurate measurements, or adequate representations of an already-existing migration reality ›out there‹, the politics of knowing migration thus become a question of what Annemarie Mol (2002, p. viii) calls »ontological politics« – that is, a question of how, – and through what kind of knowledge practices, – migration-related realities are enacted as objects of government. If we focus on knowledge practices as primary research objects, we learn that different knowledge practices enact different versions of the real (Law 2004). Thus, reality becomes multiple –, or as Annemarie Mol (2002, p. 55) puts it, »more than one – but less than many« – as the identity of objects is conceptualized as fragile and mutable (Mol 2002, p. 43). The key point is that if reality is multiple and contested, then reality, along with the practices enacting it, become highly political, since »ontological multiplicity lays bare [...] the permanent possibility of alternative configurations« (Mol 2002, p. 164).

Thus, the notion of enactment »allow[s] objects and subjects to change over time, enable[s] their identities to be fragile and allow[s] them to differ from site to site« (Ruppert 2011, p. 223). With this emphasis, the term *enacting* differs from alternative notions like ›producing‹, ›constructing‹, or ›constituting‹. To say that migration is ›constituted‹ through knowledge practices suggests a one-time creational act that brings migration into being as an object of government; in contrast, to say that migration is enacted through knowledge practices suggests a reiterative process through which migration comes to exist –, but only as long as the web of practices, artefacts, and devices holds. To say migration is ›produced‹ or ›constructed‹ suggests that migration, or migrants, are the outcomes of practices of intentional human subjects who act according to a predefined plan. Likewise, the framing of migration as ›performed‹ suggests (as in Goffmann's sociology of the everyday) a performance on the front-stage according to a pre-written script, with a back-stage to which only the performers and critical sociologists and psychologists have access (Mol 2002, p. 35). The notion of enactment, a word »without too much academic history« (Mol 2002, p. 33), has been introduced precisely to avoid such connotations; in particular, it highlights the material and technical dimensions of the practices through which migration is done, dimensions that often escape and betray the intentions of willful human subjects (cf. Scheel et al. 2019). As a result, the enactment of migration as an intelligible object of government emerges as a fragile accomplishment that is facilitated by complex, always-shifting associations comprising both human and non-human elements. In this way, the notion of enactment invites scholars to attend to the activities and »techniques that make things visible, audible, tangible, knowable« (Mol 2002, p. 33).

Another important dimension of my understanding of the politics of (non)knowledge in the (un)making of migration is that the production of different forms of nonknowledge is just as crucial in the enactment of realities as the production of knowledge. In this regard, I enrich material-semiotic approaches with insights and concepts from the sociology of ignorance (Gross and McGoey 2015b) and agnotology (Proctor 2008). This growing field of research is not only concerned with classical questions of epistemology such as asking how we generate knowledge, what qualifies knowledge as scientific or credible knowledge, and what kind of effects this knowledge has: scholars of agnotology and ignorance also ask what we do not know, why we do not know it, how this nonknowledge is produced and sustained, and what kind of effects different types of nonknowledge have (Proctor 2008). Importantly, nonknowledge is not simply conceptualized as the negative of knowledge; rather, nonknowledge—just like knowledge—must be actively produced, and various types of nonknowledge exist, such as uncertainty, doubt, secrecy, or »undone science« (Hess 2015). Moreover, the relationship between knowledge and nonknowledge is not understood in terms of a zero-sum game. Instead, nonknowledge is often intertwined with the production of knowledge, as nonknowledge is also thought of as productive (Gross and McGoey 2015a). The crucial point for the following analysis is that the production of nonknowledge also shapes how migration is enacted as an object of government.

How the productions of knowledge and nonknowledge intersect can be illustrated through previous study of a data visualization tool created by the IOM. The Global Migration Flows Interactive App (GMFIA) was supposed to make information on ›migration in the world‹ available to a wider public. Although it was deactivated in 2019, the GMFIA continues to offer an emblematic example of how statistical data on migration is taken up and used in the field of migration management. The design and set-up of the GMFIA resembles that of similar visualization tools for migration developed by other stakeholders in the field of migration management, such as FRONTEX's annual Risk Analyses Reports<sup>4</sup>, UNHCR's Interactive Dataviz<sup>5</sup>, or the IOM's

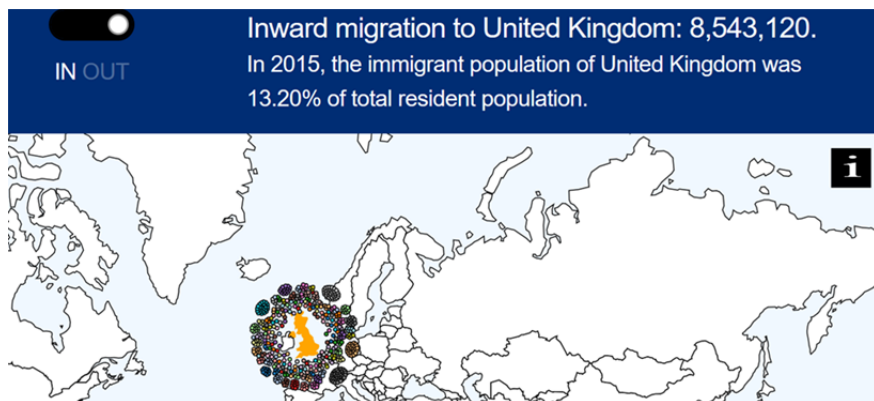
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4 FRONTEX is the acronym of the European border protection agency. It has been active since 2004. Since 2010, the agency has published several ›risk analyses‹ per year that are full of graphs and maps visualizing seemingly-exact figures about ›apprehended migrants‹, ›illegal border crossings‹, and so forth. For an overview of these reports see: <https://frontex.europa.eu/publications/?category=riskanalysis>. Accessed: 11.2.2020.

5 On UNHCR's webpage, the Dataviz is described as »an archive of interactive data visualization products created using various different technologies and software«. These data visualizations provide precise figures on statistical topics related to forced migration, such as the number of new asylum applications in particular regions or »first instance Decision

more recent Flow Monitoring app<sup>6</sup>. Until its deactivation, the GMFIA held a very prominent position on the IOM's homepage and was ranked as the first link of any search engine query for ›world migration‹ or ›migration in the world‹.

Figure 2: Interface of the GMFIA, showing immigration to the United Kingdom



Screenshot of GMFIA taken by the author. Source: <https://www.iom.int/world-migration>. Accessed: 9.10.2017.

At first glance, the GMFIA shows a conventional geopolitical map of the world (see Figure 2).<sup>7</sup> When a particular country is selected, the quantity and composition of in- and outward migration to or from that country appear on the screen. If inward migration to the UK is clicked, a circle of colored clusters emerges, with each cluster visualizing the number of immigrants from another country. If one of the colored clusters is hovered over, the respective country of origin is highlighted in the same color, and the number of immigrants from that country is displayed. For instance, the circles show that in 2017, 703,050 migrants from Poland and 9,361 migrants from Estonia resided

Trends«. To access these visualization visit: <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/dataviz>. Accessed: 11.2.2020.

<sup>6</sup> The Flow Monitoring app provides seemingly-exact figures for the number of newly-arrived migrants in Europe, disaggregated by year and migration route. Numbers are displayed in boxes that pop up if the user clicks on a particular migration route: <https://migration.iom.int/europe?type=arrivals>. Accessed: 11.2.2020.

<sup>7</sup> The GMFIA can still be accessed via the internet archive, which is why the following analysis is written in present tense: [https://web.archive.org/web/\\*/https://www.iom.int/world-migration](https://web.archive.org/web/*/https://www.iom.int/world-migration). Accessed: 11.12.2019.

in the UK. As can be seen, the GMFIA provides very exact, perfectly matching figures about the migration flows between different countries. The main effect of these seemingly-exact and perfectly-matching figures is that migration is enacted as a reality that can be managed, because it can be precisely known and quantified (Scheel and Ustek-Spilda 2019). In this way, the GMFIA supports one of the central epistemic cornerstones of the migration management paradigm (Scheel and Ustek-Spilda 2019) that has been promoted by the IOM since the 1980s (Georgi 2010). However, this enactment of migration as a precisely quantifiable and therefore manageable reality is only possible with the production of nonknowledge about the known limits of quantifying migration (cf. Scheel and Ustek-Spilda 2019).

While this nonknowledge is produced through several practices, space constraints only allow me to describe the data practice of *omission*. One important limitation of migration statistics that is omitted by the GMFIA is the known divergence between reported emigration and immigration events. As explained above, the GMFIA provides perfectly-matching figures on the number of emigrants from a particular country of origin and the number of immigrants from that country to a particular destination country. However, in practice, »emigration numbers reported by sending countries tend to differ from the corresponding immigration numbers reported by receiving countries« (de Beer et al. 2010, p. 459). This divergence is usually quite significant: for example, according to Eurostat figures, the UK reported 42,403 immigrants from Poland in 2015, while Poland reported only sending 11,682 emigrants to the UK.<sup>8</sup> Generally, figures on emigration tend to be lower than reported immigration events in receiving countries (UNECE 2008), as individuals usually have little incentive to inform their home country authorities about their departure while immigrants may enjoy some benefits from informing authorities in a destination country about their arrival. However, the GMFIA simply omits this known weakness of migration statistics by providing perfectly-matching figures for emigration and immigration.

What this example illustrates is that knowledge practices enact migration in certain ways and that these practices are informed by and carry tacit political agendas that affect how migration is enacted as an intelligible object of government. Moreover, this example illustrates that the production of knowledge is entangled with the production of nonknowledge and that the latter also affects the version of migration that is enacted through knowledge practices. In sum, the GMFIA highlights that the politics of international migration management are intertwined with a politics of (non)knowledge

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<sup>8</sup> Figures taken from Eurostat database: <http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/data/database>. Accessed: 22.11.2017.

that shape our very understanding of what migration is and whether and how it can be governed.

### 3 On the Enactment of Migration, Borders, and the National Order of Things

One question raised by the performativity of knowledge practices is how to theorize the relationship between the enactment of migration through the production of (non)knowledge and the enactment of (some) people as migrants through practices of bordering. Numerous scholars have criticized conventional state-centric understandings of migration, which not only naturalize the »national order of things« (Malkki 1995), but also ontologize migrants as readily-available objects of research. The adoption of this »nation-state point of view« (Favell 2007) in the study of migration ultimately results in reducing migration studies to a »migrantology« (Römhild 2017) that reifies the common-sense-distinction between (native) citizens and (foreign) migrants (cf. Bojadžijev and Römhild 2014; Dahinden 2016).

This nation-state point of view is held by conventional definitions of migration, as a series of linear movements from one nation-state to another. For example, the United Nations (UN) defines a migrant as »a person who moves to a country other than his or her usual residence for a period of at least a year« (UNECE 2015, p. 137). By adopting nationally-bounded, mutually-exclusive state territories as unquestioned units of analysis in the very concept of migration, such state-centric definitions of a migrant render nation-states as passive spatial containers that are crisscrossed by migratory movements. What this methodological nationalism obscures are the many practices of bordering and boundary-drawing on which nation-states rely to reproduce themselves as a demarcated territory, a bounded social group, and a sovereign authority. However, it is these very practices of bordering and boundary-drawing that enact some people as migrants (for a detailed account of this argument, see: Scheel and Tazzioli 2021).

Again, space only permits me to illustrate this point through one example, which concerns the implementation of Schengen visa policies. In general, visa policies belong to the oldest and most established techniques of outsourcing border controls beyond national demarcation lines. Imposing a visa requirement enables authorities to pre-screen and pre-select travelers before their departure (Zampagni 2016). In the context of the Schengen visa regime, the criteria for imposing a visa requirement on a specific country evaluate its population in terms of risks, »relating inter alia to illegal immigration, public policy and security« (Council 2001, p. 3). As the global map of the Schengen visa regime shows, the partition of the world into ›risky‹ and ›trustworthy‹

populations is informed by colonial legacies, geopolitical asymmetries, and profound economic inequalities (Bigo and Guild 2005).

Figure 3: Official Map of the Schengen Visa Regime

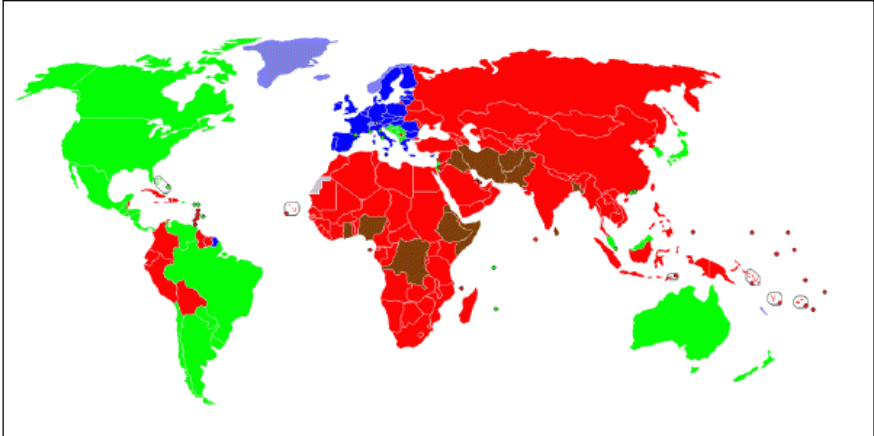


Figure Key: Member states of the Schengen area and associated countries are colored in blue. Countries whose citizens do not require a visa to travel to the Schengen area are colored in green. Countries whose citizens are subject to a visa requirement are colored in red. Citizens of countries colored in dark red (i.e., the most significant countries of origin of asylum seekers in the EU) also require an airport transit visa.

Source: [https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/what-we-do/policies/borders-and-visas/visa-policy\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/what-we-do/policies/borders-and-visas/visa-policy_en). Accessed 23.3.2020.

For all those subjected to a visa requirement, the decisive controls take place at the consulates in their country of residence and thus long before they reach the EU's geopolitical borders. In the application procedure, the presumption of innocence is reversed: it is the applicant who must prove in an interview and by providing numerous documents that, contrary to the statistical knowledge that justifies the imposition of a visa requirement in the first place, he/she does not pose a migration or security threat (Bigo and Guild 2005). In practice, any visa applicant will be denied access to mobility if they cannot convince consular staff of their ›will to return‹ to their country of departure. If the visa application of an old woman seeking to visit her children and grandchildren in Europe is rejected because her intention to »leave the territory of the Member States before the expiry of the visa applied for could not be ascertained« (EP and Council, 2009, p. 12; emphasis added), the woman is enacted as a migrant by consular staff, even though she has never

crossed a geopolitical border. She is denied mobility to her desired destination because she is suspected of seeking to settle permanently in the EU (Infantino and Rea 2012). I speak of ›enacted‹ here to highlight, first, the performative nature of bordering practices and, second, the processual and sociomaterial character of the practices through which (some) people are constituted as migrants. The practices of consular staff, such as posing questions about a person's purpose of stay or verifying the authenticity of documents, are performative because they bring into being the very subject they seek to govern: a migrant. What the consulate example highlights is that people are enacted as migrants from the moment that their movement or presence clashes with the practices of government that aim to (re-)produce the »national order of things« (Malkki 1995).

However, sites of border encounters like consulates or migration administrations are not the only instances where some people are enacted as migrants; other sites produce various kinds of data, paper files, and administrative records about people targeted as migrants and other mobile subjects. For instance, if a person applies for a Schengen visa, a file including their biometric data will be created in the Visa Information System (VIS) and stored for a period of five years. These data are analyzed in reports of the EU's IT agency eu-LISA and may also inform annual risk analyses conducted by FRONTEX. In addition, consulates keep lists of approved and rejected applications for long-term student, business, and family reunification visas, which are used for national and European migration statistics. Thus, sites of border and migration control do not only enact some people as migrants: they also play an important role in the enactment of migration as a knowable, intelligible object of government. It is here that administrative records and various kinds of data are produced that feed into the production of statistics, visualizations, and other knowledge artefacts that in turn inform and shape policy discourse and decisions, and thus also practices and logics of border and migration management (Takle 2017). What is needed is a better understanding of how this conversion is accomplished in practice—that is, how administrative records, paper files, and other inscriptions, but also instances of ignorance and non-recording, are converted, via a chain of translations and modifications, into knowledge or nonknowledge about migration. Therefore, in the following section, I introduce a sociology of translation and treason as an approach that enables scholars to trace the often-contested transformation of records and data traces on individual migrants into (non)knowledge about migration.

## 4 A Sociology of Translation and Treason for Border and Migration Studies

In contrast to realist and representationalist ontologies, a sociology of translation and treason embraces a ›flat ontology‹ that does not assume a gap between knowledge and the ›reality‹ to which this knowledge refers. Instead, entities are composed and recomposed – i.e., translated – from one situation to the next through material-semiotic practices of meaning-making that rely on complex, always-shifting sociotechnical networks. These practices result in a chain of translations that is, effectively, a chain of references, as »each sequence in the process [of translation] refers back to a prior object« (de Goede 2017, p. 29). For instance, through a sociology of translation, Bruno Latour (1999) traces how samples of soil from the Amazonian basin are collected, marked, made transportable, analyzed in a laboratory with the help of various devices and experiments, converted into inscriptions that are debated, and eventually converted into scientific facts that are published in an academic journal. Likewise, Marieke de Goede (2017) engages in a sociology of translation to delineate how a commercial transaction in the context of the ›war on terror‹ is converted from a digital data trace via its algorithmic risk assessment and flagging in a report into a sign of suspicion and a (possible) evidence of wrongdoing that calls for a security intervention. In the following, I show that a sociology of translation can also be used to trace the chains of translation through which (some) people are enacted as migrants in border encounters and how both the inscriptions and the ignorance produced in these encounters are translated into numerical and other kinds of ›facts‹ about migration.

The starting point of an analysis of these chains of translation is located in conceptualizing sites of border and migration management – such as consulates, border check posts, or migrant reception centers – as »obligatory passage points« (Callon 1986b) through which people have to pass in order to move to or stay in a desired place. At these obligatory passage points, as administrative distinctions are drawn and decisions are made, (some) mobile subjects are translated, through a range of sociomaterial practices – involving various assessments, inscription devices, files, tokens of identity, information systems, and more – into various kinds of migrants. For instance, at a consulate, a person applying for a Schengen visa becomes a visa applicant and, if their application is accepted, a tourist or a trusted business traveler. If their application is rejected, the person is instead enacted as a (potential) migrant and denied access to mobility (as explained above). Likewise, a person is enacted as an asylum seeker through the administrative procedures they must undergo in order to apply for refugee status. If the person's application



is approved, they become an officially certified refugee; if it is rejected, they become an illegalized, deportable migrant – a status they may contest in court, leaving them in a state of legal limbo. The crucial point for the argument of this article is that these encounters between mobile subjects and the actors, means, and methods of border and mobility control deployed by nation-states involve the production of data that may be used for the production of knowledge about migration. Put differently, the border-related encounters that enact some mobile subjects as migrants also involve data practices through which the subjects in question are translated (with the help of various inscription devices) into numerous forms and types of data – such as administrative records, digitized datasets, biometric templates, etc. These data may be used for the enactment of migration as an intelligible object of government through the knowledge practices of quantification, categorization, visualization, and so forth. A sociology of translation allows scholars to trace and interrogate the multiple processes of translation (and treason) that are involved in converting mobile subjects into data and other artefacts of knowledge production.

In brief, a sociology of translation can be characterized as one of the central intellectual forerunners of material-semiotic approaches, as described in the first section. Like material-semiotic approaches, a sociology of translation recognizes any given entity as an effect of complex, constantly-shifting sociotechnical networks that comprise both human and non-human elements. This is what Callon (1986b) emphasizes with the notion of translation: entities are always in a process of transformation, as the associations supporting them constantly change from one situation to the next. The central task of a sociology of translation, then, is to trace how these associations are formed, how they change from one situation to the next, and how these changes affect the entities enacted by these associations of human and non-human elements.

Three important points must be noted for such an analysis. First, a sociology of translation embraces what Callon (1986b) calls the »principle of generalised symmetry« – that is, the analyst does not only provide the same space to human and non-human elements in the analysis but also analyzes them with the same terms and methods. In this way, a sociology of translation seeks to transcend anthropocentric accounts of the world in which human beings are treated as the only relevant actors. Instead, a sociology of translation enables conceiving of human agency as the effect of complex, precarious sociotechnical actor-networks, in which material artefacts act in the sense that they ›make do‹ as they enable, constrain, facilitate, and inhibit human action in particular ways. Second, a sociology of translation introduces a radically-situated analysis that attends to minor shifts and details in order to learn how an entity changes from one situation to the next. This

follows from the premise that any change in the relationships among the various elements of a network affect the composition of the network as a whole and thus also its performative effects. Third, Callon (1986b, p. 196) emphasizes that »translation is a process, never a completed accomplishment, and it may fail«. In other words, a successful translation is the precarious and reversible outcome of a labor-intensive, often-contested process that allows a network to be represented by a single entity, which acts as a spokesperson for the network as a whole (Callon 1986a).

This last point is particularly important in the context of border and migration management, where the interests and desires of people targeted as migrants often do not coincide with the policy agendas of the actors seeking to control and regulate their movements and conduct as well as to produce knowledge about them for these purposes. On one side, the actors, means, and methods of border and migration management, along with the socio-technical networks sustaining them, often rely on tactics and ruses involving force, coercion, and outward violence to render people targeted as migrants knowable and governable. On the other side, people who are enacted, problematized, and governed as migrants often have ample reason to avoid, evade, and subvert practices of registration, regulation, and control, which are often at odds with their own interests. Thus, it is particularly important in research on borders and migration to take seriously Callon's (1986a, p. 26) observation that »translation [...] does not occur without resistance«. As a result, inspired by the work of Vasilis Galis and Francis Lee (2014), I propose enriching a sociology of translation with a vocabulary of treason in order to provide scholars with the conceptual repertoire that is needed to study and expose instances of coercion, (epistemic) violence, subversion, struggle, and so on, often featured by processes of translation in the context of border and migration management.

Following John Law's (1997) astute observation that »traduction [translation] is also trahison [treason]«, Galis and Lee (2014) argue that processes of translation – the joining of forces in sociotechnical networks – operate in tandem with processes of treason, oppression, and incapacitation aimed at the production of weakness and asymmetrical power relations.<sup>9</sup> Consequent-

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<sup>9</sup> John Law (1997) underlines the entanglement of translation and treason to underscore that »all representation also betrays its object.« While treason might initially sound like a misleading term because it carries the notion of intentional deceit, one should also consider that translators are often not aware how their work resembles a particular interpretation of the original. Just as translators (or interpreters) have to work with but cannot fully control the polyvalences and connotations of the words they use, actors cannot fully control the effects of the sociotechnical networks they mobilize and rely on in processes of translation. Galis and Lee (2014) add another twist to Law's take on translation and treason by invoking

ly, Galis and Lee (2014, p. 155) propose a vocabulary that is able to »explore the dark side of the translation process and the disruption of [alternative] actor network[s]«. They suggest *distortion*, *estrangement*, *rejection*, and *disruption* as terms indicating moments of treason within processes of translation (Galis and Lee, p. 156), although they underline that moments of treason constitute »overlapping aspects or layers of a heterogeneous process« rather than »chronological phases that historically succeed each other« (Galis and Lee, p. 156). Moreover, they follow Callon (1986b, p. 200) by stressing that, as in the case of processes of translation, »an infinite number of repertoires [of tactics and practices] is possible« when it comes to analyzing instances of treason in the forming of sociotechnical networks (Galis and Lee 2014, p. 156).

In sum, this framework enables studying the processes of translation and treason that are involved in the translation of the movements, practices, and transactions of subjects enacted as migrants into administrative records, images, digitized datasets, and other forms of data, which may be used to enact migration as an intelligible object of government. In the next section, I mobilize this framework to show, through an example case, how a sociology of translation enriched by a vocabulary of treason can help scholars theorize and analyze the relationship between the enactment of migration through knowledge practices and the enactment of migrants through practices of bordering. This example concerns the phenomenon called the ›deportation gap‹, which is often invoked to call for, authorize, and justify the introduction of ever-tougher legislation and ever-more repressive measures in the field of ›return policy‹.

## 5 Lost in Translation: Reexamining the ›Deportation Gap‹

Since the 2015 refugee crisis in Europe, numerous laws and measures have been introduced on both European and national levels to increase the rate of returns of deportable migrants. For instance, in March 2017, the European Commission (EC) launched a *Renewed Action Plan on Returns* (EC 2017). On the national level, German authorities introduced various measures, including deportation detention to prevent deportees from absconding, capture and analysis of asylum seekers' mobile phone data to determine their country of

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the notion of treason to highlight instances of force, contestation, struggle, and resistance in processes of translation – that is, instances of treason that cannot be reduced to mistranslation as a result of friction, slippage, or failure. Thus, following these careful observations of STS scholars, I use ›translation‹ as the generic term for a repertoire of concepts that is needed to account both for instances of breakdown, friction, and slippage within chains of translation as well as for moments of coercion, contestation, struggle, subversion, and resistance in related practices and procedures.

origin, and the conclusion of readmission agreements with countries with poor human rights records (like Sudan). Many of these measures go back to the so-called *Law for Better Enforcement of Return* from June 2017. However, in August 2019, the *Second Law for Better Enforcement of Return* (Deutscher Bundestag 2019) entered into force, highlighting the legal actionism in the field of return policy. The crucial point in relation to the following argument is that all these laws, and the restrictive measures they introduce, are necessary and justified by the alleged need to reduce the so-called ›deportation gap‹.

As noted in the introduction, the deportation gap refers to the discrepancy between the number of people issued with a return order and the (much smaller) number of people who are actually returned or deported (Gibney and Hansen 2003). The deportation gap is established on both national and European levels by the number of issued return orders juxtaposed with the number of officially recorded returns. Thus, the deportation gap relies on statistical knowledge about migration. On the European level, the so-called ›effective return rate‹ – the number of people who are issued a return order and who are physically returned to a so-called ›third country‹<sup>10</sup> – was approximately 36% in 2017 (ECRE 2019). If one deducts returns to accession countries in the Western Balkans (which accept EU-issued identity papers), the effective return rate is even lower – below 30%. Therefore, according to these figures, only one in three people legally obligated to leave the EU has actually returned to a country outside the Schengen area.

It is this statistical knowledge concerning the deportation gap that animates the introduction of ever-more restrictive legislation and highly intrusive measures in this contested policy field. For instance, in the context of Germany, the first *Law for Better Enforcement of Return* was justified with the following statement: »On 31<sup>st</sup> January 2017 213.439 deportable migrants<sup>11</sup> resided in Germany, according to Germany’s register of foreigners [*Ausländerzentralregister*, hereafter: AZR]. In the coming months the Federal Office for Migration and Refugees [BAMF] is expected to reject a high number of asylum applications of people not in need of protection. The number of non-returned deportable migrants will thus increase further in 2017. Hence, legislative measures are needed to achieve improvements in the area of returns« (Deutscher Bundestag 2017a: 1). However, as the following analysis shows,

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10 In the EU jargon ›third country‹ refers to any country that is not a member of the Schengen area.

11 The people concerned in this law are officially labeled as *Ausreisepflichtige*. This administrative category literally translates as ›person obligated to leave the country‹. For reasons of clarity, in the following section I translate this rather bulky bureaucratic term as ›deportable migrant‹.

the deportation gap is, to a significant extent, an effect of authorities' non-knowledge about self-organized returns.

In March 2017 – only two months after the first *Law for Better Enforcement of Return* was passed in the parliament – Frank-Jürgen Weise, Germany's then-Commissioner for Refugee Management, questioned the number of 213,439 deportable migrants. An internal report issued by Weise's office was leaked to the press: it stressed that »data stored in the AZR often provides the basis for important political decisions« before noting that »these data show considerable deficits at the moment« (Beauftragter für Flüchtlingsmanagement 2017, p. 5). In particular, the report criticized »a significant number of inconsistent and seemingly implausible datasets« about deportable migrants (Beauftragter für Flüchtlingsmanagement 2017, p. 8), and it emphasized that these data »lead to a biased debate on how to deal with [non-returned] deportable migrants and the need for respective political measures« (Beauftragter für Flüchtlingsmanagement 2017, p. 5; on this point see also: Deutscher Bundestag 2017b; Ludwig 2019). The following analysis focuses on one group of people that the report cites as a possible source for inflated numbers in the AZR on non-returned deportable migrants: people who may have already long left the Schengen area but did not notify German authorities about their departure.<sup>12</sup>

This group is quite significant in numerical terms. In 2015, the opposition inquired why there were so many deportable migrants without a toleration (*Duldung*)<sup>13</sup> registered in the AZR, despite the legal requirement to either immediately return a deportable migrant or to issue that person a toleration. At the beginning of 2015, 40,970 people were registered in the AZR. Of these people, 12,950 received benefits under the Asylum Seeker Support Law (*Asylbewerberleistungsgesetz*), indicating that they had not left Germany (Deutscher Bundestag 2015, p. 74). Regarding the remaining 28,000 people, the government responded: »It can be assumed that a *not insignificant* number of deportable migrants without a toleration have either absconded or left Germany without foreigners' offices' knowledge. Probably, these cases are

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<sup>12</sup> Other groups of people are also registered as deportable in the AZR but for which the data held in the AZR is considered implausible. The report from Weise's office highlights, for instance, that 20.4% of people registered as deportable in the AZR are asylum seekers whose cases are still pending (Beauftragter für Flüchtlingsmanagement 2017). These data can certainly also be analyzed in terms of a sociology of translation and treason. However, within the scope of this article, I can only focus on one case for illustrative purposes.

<sup>13</sup> In § 60 of Germany's residency law, a toleration (*Duldung*) is defined as a »temporary suspension of the deportation«. A toleration is not a residence title and does not offer a right to remain in Germany. Migrants issued with a toleration are still legally obligated to leave Germany; in practice, however, many migrants live in Germany for years with a repeatedly renewed toleration.

not always pursued by foreigners' offices in charge so that relevant notifications (e.g. ›place of residence unknown‹) are either entered with delay in the AZR or not entered at all. The consequence would be that such people would still be registered as ›deportable without toleration‹ in the AZR« (Deutscher Bundestag 2015, p. 74, author's translation).

If one thinks about these datasets and the people to which they refer in terms of a sociology of translation and treason, one could say that an unknown number of deportable migrants has been ›lost in translation‹. This rather counterintuitive observation becomes understandable if one considers what is expected of deportable migrants who wish to inform German authorities about their departure. A person legally obligated to leave Germany is issued a return order, an official document specifying a date by which the person concerned is legally required to leave Germany at the latest. In addition, a second document, a so-called ›border-crossing confirmation‹ (*Grenzübertrittsbescheinigung*, hereafter: GÜB), is issued to the person concerned.<sup>14</sup> To be registered as a re-emigrated migrant in the AZR, deportable migrants must have their GÜB signed and stamped at the border-crossing point they use to leave Germany. The lower part of the GÜB is kept by the border guard, who has to sign, stamp, and post the document back to the foreigners' office that issued the return order (see the image of a sample GÜB below). The caseworker in the foreigners' office then has to scan the GÜB, add it to the person's digital file, and register the person concerned as a returned migrant in the AZR. Only if all these steps are completed will the person concerned be translated into an administrative record that will feature as a recorded re-migration event in the official migration statistics and thus used in calculations of effective return rates.

In terms of a sociology of translation, the lower part of the GÜB has to be translated into a »spokesperson« (Callon 1986a) for the returning migrant. However, as just noted, a successful translation hinges on the enactment of a chain of references through sociomaterial practices: only if the lower part of the GÜB is signed and stamped by a border guard, then put in an envelope and sent to one of the more than 600 foreigners' offices in Germany that issue return orders, will the GÜB act as spokesperson for the migrant concerned. In this case, the GÜB informs caseworkers in charge of the case about the person's return: ›Yes, Mr. Y or Ms. X has actually followed your return order and left Germany via this particular border crossing point on this particular

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<sup>14</sup> It should be noted that the border-crossing confirmation is not mentioned in German Residency Law (see § 50 in German Residency Law concerning the ›Obligation to Leave‹ [§ 50 Ausreisepflicht]). Consequently, no standardized format for a GÜB exists; rather, each foreigners' office uses its own template.

Figure 4: Example for a border-crossing confirmation, with instructions of how to return it to authorities

**Kreis Bergstraße  
Der Landrat**

Kreis Bergstraße, Der Landrat, Postfach 11 07, 64629 Heppenheim

**Datum:** 3. Dezember 2009  
**Unser Zeichen:** I-7/2-152.05-1 [redacted]  
**Betrifft:** Vollzug des Aufenthaltsgesetzes (AufenthG)

**GRENZÜBERTRITTSBESCHEINIGUNG**

hier: Herr [redacted]  
geb.: [redacted] in [redacted] türkisch

**spätester Ausreisetermin: 07.01.2010**

Diese Bescheinigung ist vor Verlassen des Vertragsgebietes der Staaten des Schengener Übereinkommens (Belgien, Dänemark, Deutschland, Finnland, Frankreich, Griechenland, Island, Italien, Luxemburg, Österreich, Niederlande, Norwegen, Schweden, Spanien, Portugal, Tschechien, Estland, Zypern, Lettland, Litauen, Ungarn, Malta, Polen, Slowenien, Slowakei), d.h. bei direkter Ausreise aus Deutschland in einen Drittstaat, an einer deutschen Grenzübergangsstelle abzugeben. Bei Ausreise über einen anderen Staat des Schengener Vertragsgebietes ist die Ausreise hingegen durch Abgabe der Bescheinigung bei der deutschen Auslandsvertretung (Botschaft oder Generalkonsulat) im Heimatland nachzuweisen.

Dies ist insofern erforderlich, als zwischen den Schengen-Staaten grundsätzlich keine Grenzkontrollen mehr bestehen und faktisch eine Wiedereinreise nach Deutschland möglich ist. Sofern die Bescheinigung nicht in Rücklauf gelangt, können Sie gemäß § 50 Abs. 7 Aufenthaltsgesetz in den Fahndungsmitteln der Polizei zur Aufenthaltsermittlung und Festnahme ausgeschrieben werden.


Gem. § 50 Abs. 1 Aufenthaltsgesetz ist der o.a. Ausländer verpflichtet, die Bundesrepublik Deutschland bis zum o.a. Termin zu verlassen.

Im Auftrag \_\_\_\_\_  
Siegel

Stempel der Grenzdienststelle

Datum: .....

**Urschriftlich zurück an:**  
Kreis Bergstraße –Der Landrat-  
Postfach 11 07  
64629 Heppenheim / Deutschland



Gräffstraße 5  
64646 Heppenheim  
Telefonzentrale: 06252 15-0  
www.kreis-bergstrasse.de


**Ausländer- und Migrationsamt**  
Sachgebiet Ausländerangelegenheiten  
Sachbearbeitung: [redacted]

**Dienstanschrift:**  
64646 Heppenheim  
Graben 15, Zimmer [redacted]  
Durchwahl: 06252 / 155 [redacted]  
Telefax: 06252 / 155 540  
E-mail: [redacted]

Montag und Dienstag	8.00 Uhr - 12.00 Uhr und 14.00 Uhr - 15.30 Uhr
Donnerstag	8.00 Uhr - 12.00 Uhr und 14.00 Uhr - 18.00 Uhr
Freitag	8.00 Uhr - 11.30 Uhr

**Bankverbindungen:**  
Postbank Frankfurt (BLZ 500 100 80) 8949 - 806  
Sparkasse Bensheim (BLZ 509 500 88) 1 025 865  
Verenbank Heppenheim (BLZ 509 914 00) 10 110 904

Sparkasse Starkenburg (BLZ 509 514 89) 30 166  
Volksbank Bergstraße (BLZ 509 501 01) 2 481  
Sparkasse Worms (BLZ 553 500 10) 3 160 009



Metropolregion  
Frankfurt/Rhein-Main

Source: <https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Grenz%C3%BCbertrittsbescheinigung>. Accessed: 20.6.2020.

day«. Moreover, only if the busy caseworker remembers – after a long and busy working day – to scan the GÜB, add it to the person’s digital file, and create an entry about the person’s departure in the AZR will the GÜB successfully act as a stand-in for the return of the person concerned. Only if all these conditions are met and all these associations and chains of references are formed will the GÜB become a digital record that is eventually translated into an emigration event in official migration statistics. In this way, the GÜB becomes a signifier of a return-event of a deportable migrant that eventually increases the rate of effective returns cited in policy documents like the EC’s (2017) *Renewed Action Plan on Returns*.

However, as the German government conceded in its reply to the parliamentary inquiry (see above), the processes sustaining the translation of deportable migrants into officially returned migrants are, in many instances, fraught with friction, disrupted, or actively subverted. This occurs when the sociotechnical networks sustaining them do not hold. One important source for instances of friction, slippage, and treason concerns the return of the GÜB. If returning migrants travel directly by plane from Germany to their country of origin, it is relatively easy for them to return the lower part of the GÜB to a member of the German border police at the airport and to follow the established procedure outlined above. However, Germany is surrounded by other Schengen member states; consequently, there are no border checkpoints at Germany’s land borders where returning migrants can have their GÜB signed, stamped, and sent back to the issuing foreigners’ office. Since border guards of other Schengen member states are not required to deal with paperwork of the German state, and since migrants could easily re-enter Germany from another Schengen member state due to the absence of border controls, migrants cannot return their GÜB when leaving Germany if they do so via a land border or if they take a connecting flight through another Schengen member state.

In these cases, deportable migrants are asked to bring their GÜB to the nearest German consulate in their country of origin after their return.<sup>15</sup> However, it is reasonable to assume that many migrants do not follow this request. Given that German consulates are usually overcrowded, that the nearest German consulate may be hundreds of kilometers away from the migrants’ new place of residence, and that the booking of an appointment often involves hefty fees, it is quite likely that many returned migrants decide to pay no heed to their GÜB. In these cases, migrants have left Germany but

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<sup>15</sup> On this point, see section 50.4.1.2 of the comment on § 50 of the German Residency Law on the webpage *Migrationsrecht.net*: [https://www.migrationsrecht.net/component/com\\_joomlaw/Itemid,232/id,286/layout,vwv/view,comment/](https://www.migrationsrecht.net/component/com_joomlaw/Itemid,232/id,286/layout,vwv/view,comment/). Accessed: 20.6.2020.



they continue to be registered as a deportable, non-returned migrant in the AZR, thus contributing to a low rate of effective returns and a widening deportation gap. This occurs because these migrants have literally been lost in translation.

However, it would be too easy to only attribute these mistranslations to instances of friction and failure that result from a somewhat-outdated method for recording return migration events. The partial non-recording of self-organized return migration is also, to a certain extent, an effect of the recalcitrance of deportable migrants, who may see little reason to satisfy the administrative needs of an exclusionary migration regime that disrupted their lives and projects in Germany. This ›sweet revenge‹ is complemented by another instance of treason: a tactic of subversion by which visa overstayers can bypass laws stipulating fines for illegal stay in a particular member state.<sup>16</sup> Since no coordinated sanctions for visa overstayers exist on the EU level, national authorities are only authorized to enforce laws on illegal stay with respect to their own jurisdiction. Thus, overstayers can avoid fines imposed by the national laws of the member state that issued their visa by leaving the Schengen area via another Schengen member state (EU Council 2015).<sup>17</sup> In the case of previous encounters with German authorities, this tactic contributes to the unknown number of non-recorded return events, a form of non-knowledge that (somewhat ironically) is translated, via calculations of the rate of effective returns on the basis of AZR data, into statistical knowledge about a growing deportation gap, leading to calls for tougher measures in the field of return policy.

In brief, numerous forces, factors, and sources are responsible for the non-recording and mistranslation of many instances of return migration. Taken together, the manifold webs of practices of translation and treason involved in the enactment of the deportation gap illustrate how the politics of international migration management are entangled with a politics of

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<sup>16</sup> According to § 95 of the German Residency Law, illegal stay in Germany constitutes a crime that is subject to fines or imprisonment of up to one year.

<sup>17</sup> I was able to observe firsthand this return practice of visa overstayers during fieldwork at a large international airport in the Schengen area in 2012. In 2015, border control authorities tried to produce knowledge about the scope and practicalities of this tactic on a European level, in order to assess (and push for) the need for legislative action on the EU level. To this end, operation *Amberlight* was initiated under the Latvian presidency of the EU Council. During a two-week period of study at 34 European airports, 1,344 overstayers were recorded exiting via a different member state than the one that had issued the visa. The final report of operation *Amberlight* – with its maps, charts, numerical facts, and policy recommendations – can also be read as the result of numerous chains of translations (Latvian Presidency 2015).

(non)knowledge that proves to be decisive in the (un)making of migration as an object of government.

## 6 Conclusion

The tracing of chains of references and related processes of translation that convert records of border crossings into statistical knowledge about return migration illustrates how migration is enacted in multiple, contingent, and at times conflicting ways, as an intelligible reality with specific features. These features – like the divergence between the number of return orders and the official count of returned migrants – raise particular problematizations of government, such as the deportation gap. Consequently, the analysis above demonstrates the potential of a sociology of translation and treason to investigate how practices of bordering feature in the production of (non)knowledge about migration, as well as how the latter informs and shapes the formulation of migration policies and, consequently, specific logics and practices of border and migration management.

With regard to the deportation gap, the second dimension of this question becomes evident in a study conducted by the consultant company McKinsey. At the height of the ›migration crisis‹ in 2015, the BAMF paid nearly 2 million euro to the consultancy company to prepare a study on deportation obstacles and how to address them. Based on AZR data, the study projected that the number of deportable migrants would significantly increase in the coming years, claiming that

»the total number of deportable migrants will increase significantly in view of the high number of pending asylum claims (about 580.000 in September 2016), the number of expected asylum claims for 2017 and the relatively low number of returns (85.000 in 2016 and forecasted for 2017). [...] this is likely to result in an **increase of the number of deportable migrants in Germany to ca. 485.000 by the end of 2017**. [...] In comparison to 2016, this would require a seven-fold increase of returns, if all deportable migrants should be returned by the end of 2017« (BAMF 2016, p. 9; passage in bold adopted from the original).

It is precisely this claimed need for legislative action and more effective measures in the policy field of return, derived from these figures and related projections, that is used to justify a call for more restrictive laws and measures. This justification is illustrated by the quote from the preamble of the *First Law for Better Enforcement of Returns*, cited in the previous section.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> An earlier version of the law actually quoted the questionable estimate of 485,000 deportable migrants by the end of 2017 from the McKinsey study. According to a parliamentary inquiry of the party *Die Linke*, however, the official number of deportable migrants was much lower at the end of 2017, at 228,859 people (Deutscher Bundestag 2018, p. 77).

The analysis in this article shows that the deportation gap is, to a certain extent, a statistical chimera, resulting from – among other things – the non-recording of self-organized return migration. However, the limited existing knowledge about the unknown number of deportable migrants leaving Germany without the authorities knowing is ignored by the McKinsey study and translated into nonknowledge that informs statistical knowledge about an allegedly growing deportation gap. This has very real consequences for the people concerned: among others, the *First Law for Better Enforcement of Returns* authorizes the police to conduct unannounced raids at night and to impose detention on migrants who do not cooperate with authorities in establishing their identity and country of origin in deportation procedures.

What is underscored by the above analysis is the irreducibly political nature of the production of (non)knowledge about migration. Such politics of (non)knowledge in the (un)making of migration consist of at least three dimensions. First, both knowledge production and the interrelated production of nonknowledge shape how migration is enacted as an intelligible, actionable object of government. In this way, knowledge practices – and the versions of migration they enact – inform and configure particular logics and practices of border and migration management. The second, related dimension concerns the tactics and practices migrants deploy to evade, resist, or subvert governments' attempts to accumulate knowledge about them. Precisely because they are often enacted as a problematic population group requiring political intervention, migrants often have ample reason to refuse to be known, or at least to be known in this way, and to counteract the means and methods of knowledge production. After a recent count of the homeless population in Berlin in spring 2020, aid organizations argued that many homeless people with citizenship of another EU member state may have evaded the enumeration due to fears of being stripped of their right to freedom of movement as EU citizens and deported—a practice that has gained momentum across EU member states in recent years (Memarnia 2020). Such practices of evasion and resistance constitute an important but often overlooked aspect of migrants' struggles.

The third dimension concerns the performativity of knowledge practices. If different knowledge practices – that is, different methods of counting, categorizing, sorting, representing, narrating, data cleaning, visualizing, etc. – enact different versions of migration (that is, different versions of the reality), then knowledge production about migration constitutes an inherently political activity. This is because »ontological multiplicity lays bare [...] the permanent possibility of alternative configurations« (Mol 2002, p. 164). Thus, taking the performativity of knowledge practices seriously underscores scholars' responsibility for the (non)knowledge they produce and dissemi-

nate about migration (cf. Garelli and Tazzioli 2013; Scheel et. al. 2019; Stierl 2020). Indeed, migration studies scholars emerge as important stakeholders in the »politics of international migration management« (Geiger and Pécoud 2010), since the knowledge they produce modulates how migration is enacted as a reality, with particular features inviting certain interventions of government. The responsibility and answerability of migration studies scholars for the knowledge they produce resides in their capacity not only to expose alternative or conflicting enactments of migration but also to participate in alternative enactments of migration, where previous enactments do not yet exist. If and how a scholar makes use of this capacity affects their identity as a migration studies scholar. Ultimately, a sociology of translation and treason presents the challenge to engage in knowledge practices that enable enacting migration in ways that are less securitizing, commodifying and victimizing than the versions of migration with which we are currently confronted.

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