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Reflexivity as Critique?
A Conversation on the Politics of Knowledge Production in Migration Studies

Abstract

This article, which examines the role of *reflexivity* in the field of migration studies, is composed as a conversation with four reflexive migration scholars: Anna Amelina, Iva Dodevska, Maissam Nimer, and Omololá S. Olarinde-Olomola. Reflexivity implies analyzing how migration-related phenomena are scientifically observed, how these observations are transformed into knowledge, and how this knowledge is enacted in an academic field. Bringing in their different positionalities, perspectives, and experiences, the contributors discuss tensions between ethical claims and academic realities, the dominance of perspectives from the Global North, as well as the risk for reflexivity to become detached from critical engagement or struggle against migration governance and its violent excesses. The conversation highlights the need to move toward genuinely transformative research that reflects not only on *what* we study, but also on *how* and *why* we study migration-related issues, situated in broader institutional structures of knowledge production.

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Reflexivität als Kritik? Ein Gespräch über die Politiken der Wissensproduktion in der Migrationsforschung

Zusammenfassung

Dieser Beitrag, der sich mit der Rolle von *Reflexivität* im Feld der Migrationsforschung befasst, ist als Gespräch mit vier reflexiven Migrationsforscherinnen konzipiert: Anna Amelina, Iva Dodevska, Maissam Nimer und Omololá S. Olarinde-Olomola. Reflexivität bedeutet zu analysieren, wie migrationsbezogene Phänomene beobachtet werden, wie diese Beobachtungen in Wissen umgewandelt werden und wie dieses Wissen als wissenschaftliche Erkenntnis in einem akademischen Feld hervorgebracht wird. Unter Einbeziehung ihrer unterschiedlichen Positionalitäten, Perspektiven und Erfahrungen diskutieren die vier Migrationsforscherinnen Spannungen zwischen ethischen Ansprüchen und akademischen Realitäten, die Dominanz von Perspektiven aus dem Globalen Norden sowie das Risiko, dass Reflexivität sich von der kritischen Auseinandersetzung mit oder dem Kampf gegen Migrationspolitik und deren gewaltvollen Dimensionen löst. Das Gespräch unterstreicht die Notwendigkeit, zu einer wirklich transformativen Forschung überzugehen, die nicht nur reflektiert, *was* wir untersuchen, sondern auch, *wie* und *warum* wir migrationsbezogene Themen untersuchen, und wie diese in institutionellen Strukturen der Wissensproduktion verortet sind.

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Introduction

Whenever you read the news, take a look at social media, or study any political party's program, it becomes abundantly clear: nowadays, migration is everywhere. In light of the last decade's hype surrounding migration and the resulting research boom, a growing number of migration scholars have come to (self-)reflexively scrutinize their own knowledge practices, analyzing the

politics of knowledge production in their interdisciplinary field of study. As a result, reflexivity has become a much-used notion, concept, and approach in international migration studies, epitomized by the title of the IMISCOE network's annual conference in 2024: »Migration as a Social Construction. A Reflexive Turn«.[1]

Scholars associated with the emerging subfield of reflexive migration studies emphasize the need for a reflexive approach in order to consider the situatedness of academic knowledge production, the positionality of researchers, and the acknowledgement of a crisis of migration categories and terminologies. Moreover, they suggest scrutinizing the relationship more closely between scholarship and policymaking, and decenter or decolonize migration studies (e.g., Nieswand and Drotbohm 2014; Dahinden 2016; Amelina 2021). Commonly, reflexive approaches offer a fundamental critique of the (Eurocentric) epistemologies, ontologies, and the moral economies prevailing in migration studies (Stielike et al. 2025).

However, we—Maurice Stierl, Laura Stielike, Philipp Schäfer and Inken Bartels—, the organizers of the IMISCOE roundtable discussion entitled »Reflexivity as Critique? The Politics of Knowledge Production in Migration Studies«,[2] on which this contribution is based, have recently shown that morally-charged claims in reflexive migration studies often stand in tension with the field's socio-material practices (Stielike et al. 2024). By and large, the subfield of reflexive migration studies adheres to the dominant economies of scientific knowledge production and academic labor, such as highly exclusionary and often exploitative hiring, research, conference, and publishing procedures.

For the IMISCOE roundtable, we invited Anna Amelina, Iva Dodevska, Maissam Nimer, and Omololá S. Olarinde-Olomola to share their own reflections on possible tensions between the morally-charged claims and the material conditions when *doing* reflexive migration research. We asked these scholars to also discuss the relationship between reflexivity and critique, following our observation—at least in the context of Germany—that scholars associated with reflexive migration studies rarely engages with critical migration studies, a subfield associated with the autonomy of migration approach, migration and border regime analyses, as well as post-migrant perspectives (Bojadžijev and Karakayalı 2007; Papadopoulos et al. 2008; Tsianos and Karakayalı 2010; Hess 2010; Mezzadra and Neilson 2013; De

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1 IMISCOE is the largest interdisciplinary migration research network in Europe and beyond (www.imiscoe.org).
2 This roundtable discussion took place on 2 July 2024 at the 21st IMISCOE Annual Conference in Lisbon.

Genova 2017; Yıldız 2023). We wondered about this lack of engagement, not least due to critical migration research's long existence, impact, and its contributions to debates on the politics of knowledge production in migration research and governance (e.g., Georgi and Wagner 2009; Hess 2014; New Keywords Collective 2015; Bartels 2018; Braun et al. 2018; Hatton 2018; Stierl 2020). Scholars engaged in critical migration research tend to take an explicitly political stance, for example, by intervening into political debates or engaging in activist research practices, thereby accepting potential career risks. We wondered whether labeling themselves as ›reflexive‹ would allow scholars to distance themselves from the unruly associations that the term ›critical‹ may evoke.

Reflexivity often implies analyzing how migration-related phenomena are scientifically observed, how these observations are transformed into knowledge, and how this knowledge is enacted in an academic field. As we argued in a recent article, we see a risk that a (self-)reflexive mode of knowledge production on migration might reintroduce the role of a seemingly uninvolved observer—the reflexive migration researcher—and thereby create distances of various kinds: distances from colleagues who produce ›conventional‹ knowledge on migration; distances from migration scholars who take an explicit political stance; distances from migration-related activism; and distances from the hardships many people, constructed as migrants, face (Stielike et al. 2024).

In view of these challenges and concerns, and following our rich discussions at IMISCOE 2024, we asked four scholars, who have contributed in diverse ways to the development of reflexive migration studies, to engage in a written conversation about their experiences with reflexivity and critique in current migration research.[3] Anna Amelina, Professor for Intercultural Communication at the Chemnitz University of Technology in Germany; Iva Dodevska, Postdoctoral Researcher at the Brussels School of Governance at Vrije Universiteit Brussel in Belgium; Maissam Nimer, Senior Researcher at the Department of Sociology, Akdeniz University in Turkey; and Omololá S. Olarinde-Olomola, Senior Lecturer in Economics at Elizade University in Nigeria, responded to three sets of questions about the challenges and tensions of practicing reflexivity critically.

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3 Following our panel discussion at IMISCOE 2024, we asked all participants to write down their contributions as responses to three sets of questions. We subsequently edited and arranged the responses to allow for an accessible read.

Encountering Reflexivity

Thank you all for participating in this conversation. For us, as a research group studying the knowledge production on migration, engaging with the emerging paradigm of reflexivity in migration research has been important in our analytical work over the last years. How did you first encounter the question of reflexivity in migration studies?

Maissam Nimer: I first encountered the question of reflexivity in migration studies the summer after defending my PhD in 2016. At that time, I was optimistic, engaging with prestigious, well-funded migration research groups. However, my initial enthusiasm faded when I realized that these centers operated more like mass production facilities for research projects, mainly commissioned by funding institutions in the Global North, with little regard for genuine academic advancement. These projects lacked scholarly rigor and reflexivity as well as relevance for over-researched migrant and refugee populations. This led to a sense of alienation from the research to which I was contributing. Sharing my experiences with colleagues revealed that many felt similarly disillusioned, prompting me to critically examine the processes and structures governing our research environment. This reflection resulted in a blog post titled »Reflections on the Political Economy in Forced Migration Research« in the Sociological Review, in which I questioned the adequacy of the Institutional Review Board ethics process in forced migration research, critiquing its reliance on dominant Euro-American conventions without considering the nuances of informed consent in different contexts (Nimer 2019). I argued for a more genuine reflection on ethics that addresses the disconnect between over-researched interviewees and the outcomes of their participation as well as one that scrutinizes the broader political economy influencing funding allocation and research design. Specifically, I highlighted two major issues: 1) competition for funding leads to over-researching and interviewee fatigue, and 2) research topics are often determined by funding organizations in the Global North, rendering local partners mere implementers rather than active contributors, perpetuating a cycle of project churning.

Now, as a principal investigator on projects, I strive to foster a more collaborative and equitable research environment. I ensure that input is shared equally within the team, regardless of hierarchy, and that output is fairly distributed. Most importantly, I incorporate reflexive analysis into our methodology, examining our research practices through an intersectional and decolonial lens. This involves questioning and writing about how team dynamics influence findings, identifying whose perspectives are represented and whose are omitted, and critically evaluating the categories used in our

studies. By reintroducing societal structures into our analysis and acknowledging the impact of colonial histories and postcolonial legacies, I aim to produce research that is both ethically sound and academically robust. Reflexivity, for me, is not just an add-on but a central component of my research practice, driving me to continually question and improve our approaches to studying migration.

Omololá S. Olarinde-Olomola: Like Maissam, I first encountered reflexivity at the postdoctoral level. It was upon completion of the *Migration for Inclusive African Growth (MIAG)* project when my colleague, Parvati Raghuram, suggested that we, African women and migration scholars who were working on the project, should think reflexively about our experience (Olarinde et al. 2024). I found vast literature on the subject that, at the time, was completely new for me. We started to try to *do* reflexivity, although initial attempts were difficult, particularly detaching from previous experiences of objectivity and deductive reasoning. We had progressed significantly when we encountered Isaac Dery (2020) who claimed that African universities were requiring more reflexivity. I thought about my experience of getting a PhD in Nigeria just a few years earlier and tried to understand how Dery's suggestion could resonate with my work. I realized that in my field of economics, being reflexive was considered a purely academic exercise, practiced in the context of thesis writing, but not beyond this. The emphasis in my postgraduate education was not on aspects of reflexivity and decoloniality but on critical thinking and questioning assumptions. This led to original scholarship, and an emphasis on rethinking concepts and theories with which we were working.

During my PhD, re-examining conceptual assumptions made a world of difference and was key in the production of new knowledge. Still, when compared to how we practiced reflexivity at MIAG, my previous experience was inadequate as a reflexive practice. Only by doing reflexivity with my colleagues at MIAG did I acknowledge the need to engage more reflexively with objects of economic research. Beyond questioning taken-for-granted assumptions that I had already learned at the PhD level, examining my positionality (Adu-Ampong and Adams 2020) as well as co-creating knowledge when interacting with research subjects and colleagues (Jansma et al. 2022) were new to me. Doing reflexivity now meant for me to question my frame of thinking as an economist and woman researcher interested in both migration and gender. This exercise led to reasoning migration experiences outside strict ›rational‹ frames in which the migrant is motivated to maximize benefits, and understanding more nuanced heuristic rules that affect migration decision-making and how these are gendered (Olarinde et al. 2023).

Iva Dodevska: When I first encountered the idea of reflexivity in reference to migration research, I was early in my doctoral research. As other fresh PhD candidates, I read a lot of literature in preparation for designing and carrying out my research project. However, the more I read from the migration research literature, the worse I felt for choosing to pursue a PhD in this field. I found myself aghast at what seemed to me as a body of scholarship largely aligned with state-defined, often oppressive, political agendas (e.g., ›migration management‹, ›migrant integration‹, etc.) that did not align with my own worldviews. It seemed that there was little space for critical perspectives in a field predominantly defined by a neocolonial, Eurocentric gaze where the precarious mobility of Global South subjects forged the careers of mobility-privileged researchers based in the wealthiest countries of the world. At the time, I was in an academic environment that did not provide an answer to such concerns. I think the first time I encountered the term ›reflexive knowledge‹ in the context of migration research was when I read Janine Dahinden's article on »de-migranticization« (2016). The reflexive literature and the IMISCOE Standing Committee »Reflexivities in Migration Studies«, in particular, eased the crisis I was going through and filled in the gaps for me. I realized that there were researchers who felt the same discomfort with migration research and who were set on scrutinizing the ways we produce knowledge about ›migrants‹ and ›migration‹.

And that is precisely what reflexivity means to me and my work. It is a (much-needed) feeling of discomfort at the knowledge we produce; an inability to normalize ›migration‹ and ›migrants‹ as objects of study; and a need to question the knowledge that is being produced—including our own personal role in it. Reflexive migration studies articulates this unease and gives it a form and shape. It is a tool to validate questioning the knowledge production on migrants, including—and I would say especially—in academia. A reflexive attitude keeps us, as researchers, always on the edge of our seats, so to speak. It helps prevent us from settling into our work routines and normalizing the vocabularies that pervade our field of research—vocabularies that are also linked to so much state-induced violence over people on the move and racialized populations. Reflexivity keeps us constantly aware that what we say and write and do as migration researchers has consequences in the wider societal discourse, as they can both challenge and legitimize migration management narratives.

Anna Amelina: Thinking about my first encounter with the notion of reflexivity, I have to think about European sociology in the 1990s and the increased visibility of the topic of reflexivity associated with the writings of Ulrich Beck and Anthony Giddens some decades ago (Beck et al. 1994). Pierre Bourdieu's ideas on reflexivity (Bourdieu 2004) have also been very influen-

tial, directly in the field of sociology, and more indirectly influencing migration studies. With his reflection on the educational and scientific institutions, Bourdieu proposed to systematically question the epistemological biases and the institutional conditions of (scientific) knowledge formation. He highlighted the embeddedness of scientific knowledge in social, political, and institutional conditions of its formation (Wacquant and Bourdieu 1996 [1992]). More recently, sociological thinking on questions of reflexivity has found its way into migration scholarship. A prominent example is the work of Boris Nieswand and Heike Drotbohm (2014).

At the same time, I would not argue that scholars in migration studies have completely ignored the subject of reflexivity in their own knowledge production in the 20th century. We can recall a number of prominent historic publications in the fields of sociology (Simmel 2013 [1908]), postcolonial studies (Du Bois 1920), history (Mongia 1999), anthropology (Clifford and Marcus 1986), and critical race theory (Delgado 1995; Malkki 1992; Roediger 1991; Zetter 1988) that have been intensively debated in international migration research. These multiple contributions have, however, not been explicitly framed in the (European) academic discourse as a ›reflexive turn‹. This did not occur until the above-mentioned edited collection by Nieswand and Drotbohm (2014) was published and explicitly used this expression in the book title.

So, in my eyes, the explicit framing of the subject of knowledge production in migration studies as a ›reflexive turn‹ mirrors an increased number of publications around transnational studies, critical race theory, decolonial studies, and knowledge production, which have emerged since the early 2000s. These publications addressed topics of »methodological nationalism« (Wimmer and Glick Schiller 2003), »methodological whiteness« (Bhambra 2017), geo- and body-politics of knowledge (Mignolo and Tlostanova 2006), ethnic groupism (Glick Schiller et al. 2006), »de-migranticization« (Dahinden 2016), and de-nationalism (Anderson 2019; Dahinden and Anderson 2021), to mention only a few. In my reading, ›doing reflexivity‹ means to identify practices of signification, practices of naming by institutions and organizations (which Janine Dahinden terms ›migranticization‹) as an essential element of migration and integration governance and to critique migration and integration governance as a hegemonic institution. Therefore, I personally use the expressions ›reflexive‹ and ›critical‹ in migration studies synonymously.

Challenges and Tensions in Reflexive Migration Studies

As so vividly described in your answers to the first question, reflexive migration studies have considerably evolved over the last decade. What do you consider to be the key challenges for this subfield today? Do you see tensions between the morally-

charged claims of reflexive migration studies and the current economies of academic knowledge production on migration and its labor conditions?

Iva Dodevska: In my view, there are several important challenges. First, the field that we call »migration studies«, including reflexive migration studies, is both infrastructurally and epistemologically largely constrained within white, European, and I would even add, mostly North- and West-European academia. There is only so much one can do from that limited, privileged vantage point. No matter how critical, it still primarily articulates the views and concerns of Global North academics.

Second, another problem emerges from tensions between claims of reflexive migration studies and the current economies of producing knowledge. Especially in the context of the prevalent precarity of early- and mid-career scholars, one should note that, career-wise, there is not necessarily a reward attached to adopting a critical/reflexive lens. In fact, often such marginal perspectives and the very themes that we choose to study (e.g., knowledge production) do not tend to be as popular with policymakers, funders, or employers (as opposed to, for instance, research agendas around predicting migration flows, understanding why people migrate, or anything focused on numbers and statistics). This might change as we see more mainstreaming of reflexive approaches and ongoing transformations in the field of migration research. (One current, but striking example is the recently filled professorship in reflexive migration studies at Osnabrück University). But as for now, there is still a tension between senior scholars who are in secure positions and often have little incentive to challenge dominant paradigms, which often helped establish and define their academic careers, and precarious junior and mid-career scholars who often are most vocal in demanding a change in scholarship practices but whose alignment with reflexive/critical perspectives makes them more exposed to precarity.

Third, a particularly difficult issue is determining what reflexive migration studies can achieve from within the mainstream field of migration studies. Even though we see signs (for instance, in the thematic focus of recent IMISCOE conference calls) that it is becoming more critical, more inclusive, and more open to non-European and decolonial approaches, migration studies as a field of research will always study ›migrants‹ and ›migration‹. It will always see these two as objective phenomena. It will always seek to remain relevant to policymakers, thus legitimizing established vocabularies, categories, and classifications that are inherently deeply problematic. In this sense, it will remain stuck in methodological nationalism and complicity with how states deal with mobility. If this were not the case, there would be no migration studies—we would call it something else. In this context, it is undoubtedly a positive development that there is a critical stream in the field, but,

nonetheless, it makes one wonder what we can achieve as reflexive scholars in a field that is inherently defined to respond to a statist gaze on human mobility. We do not want to make reflexive migration studies another tool in cementing the hegemony of neocolonial academia. Therefore, we should be both excited and extremely cautious in seeing the adjective ›reflexive‹ proliferating in migration scholarship, as there is always the risk of it becoming an empty signifier that allows for the status quo to continue.

Maissam Nimer: Returning to Iva's second point, in my view, the key challenges for reflexive migration studies stem from the prevalent mass production model in many migration research centers, which prioritize project output for overhead gains, leading to researcher alienation. This model often emphasizes crafting ›innovative‹ proposals that align with policy priorities over genuine academic advancement and scholarly depth, frequently sidelining reflexivity in research, particularly in forced migration studies. Reflexivity, when included, is often treated as an afterthought rather than a central element of the research process, undermining its potential to drive structural change in research commissioning, design, and implementation. For example, when forming an editorial team for a renowned journal, a suggestion to promote greater reflexivity in knowledge production was brushed aside with the explanation that one team member already focused on reflexivity—implying that reflexive engagement is a niche concern rather than a shared responsibility among all researchers.

This marginalization is problematic in the current economies of academic knowledge production and labor conditions, where reflexivity risks becoming a token gesture in grant proposals or ethics applications rather than a meaningful practice. The true value of reflexive migration studies lies in its potential to critically examine and challenge existing research paradigms and methodologies, fostering a deeper and more nuanced understanding of migration phenomena. To address these challenges, there must be a concerted effort to embed reflexivity at the core of research practices, recognizing its importance and ensuring it is systematically integrated into all research stages. This shift would move beyond the superficial ›add reflexivity and stir‹ approach toward a genuinely reflexive and transformative research culture.

Omololá S. Olarinde-Olomola: I view reflexive migration studies from my positionality as an African economist and think that the latency in the use of reflexivity is associated with its slow adaptation by disciplines, such as economics and especially by economics scholars in Africa. While there is a vibrant and emerging scholarship that appeals to reflexive methodologies in other social sciences, its use in economics in Africa is still limited. I became aware through one of my African colleagues on the MIAG project that reflexive methodology was part of her research methods curriculum in geography.

In contrast, I had not previously encountered it in my studies. I have since acknowledged its benefits and have introduced my students to it. One challenge I find is how difficult it is to ask students to *do* reflexivity at the same time that I am asking them to detach from the object and subject of their study and be rational, which is the major requirement for thesis writing in my field. I currently approach this by introducing reflexivity *ex-post*, after the thesis has been written. I think that reflexive studies should be taught in research methodology training in African institutions such as mine. Specifically, I think that reflexivity should be used as reflected in Bourdieu's writing (2004), to interrogate disciplinary limitations.

Another key concern that I have is how to do reflexivity myself. My experience shows that it requires some skill to avoid narcissistic confessions. I think that reflexivity should not be constrained by the limitations of critical reasoning, which often require adhering to a specific process to acquire knowledge. There should be some clear requirements including identifying one's positionality and avoiding confessional discourse. A compilation of ideas on what is currently practiced as reflexivity, particularly as a guide to those starting in the practice, is useful as suggested by Dery and others (Dery 2020; Olarinde et al. 2024). However, I think that doing reflexivity requires a temporary detachment from established reasoning parameters to consider what could be outside of those frames. This approach is particularly useful for scholars who are custodians of knowledge from their local environment, to ensure that local knowledge does not become fragmented in the process of restricting it to Northern/Western theoretical perspectives and frames.

One final concern I would like to address is the critique of knowledge generated through reflexive thinking. I believe that my contributions could not have been achieved without embracing reflexivity. Although reflexivity itself fosters epistemological development, the knowledge produced through this lens can also benefit from evaluation within traditional disciplinary frameworks. This does not undermine the inherent validity of reflexivity as a knowledge production process; rather, it enables adopters of the reflexive approach to push beyond the existing boundaries of what is understood in the discipline.

In terms of the economies of academic knowledge production and its labor conditions, I would draw the reader's attention to the colonization of knowledge production and the long-term dominance that can result from being the first to advance a certain technology or knowledge (Krugman 1991; Hacker and Pierson 2016). Examples of this dominance include editorial positions in journals and how this determines who and what gets published. For instance, migration in parts of West Africa can be understood as part of social and cultural practices related to coming of age. This perspective conflicts

with dominant views in migration studies that see migration as a problem (Salazar 2010; Ungruhe and Esson 2017). To overcome this dominant view and explore other perspectives, it is important to create spaces to discuss and promote other concepts of significance to non-Western scholars (Jacobs 2022).

The tension between the claims of reflexive migration studies and the practices of academic knowledge production is, to my mind, a productive tension. In other words, it is a level of pressure that is, in the economic sense, efficient. Given the immersion of self without the autobiographical catch, reflexive studies generally allow the researcher to appeal to critical thinking processes that could be different from their core disciplinary frames and perspectives. In this way, reflexive studies offer scholars the opportunity to use their own perspectives, which reflect their positionality as related to ethnicity, gender, and other characteristics. This intersectional character is unique to reflexivity (Rodriguez 2018). From my experience, reflexivity often requires ›permission‹ to escape traditional academic perspectives and to use a more constructivist approach.

Anna Amelina: I would like to answer this question from a slightly different angle. From my point of view, this question invites us to re-review the uses of theory at the university as a societal institution. In other words, my response is not primarily in reference to an obvious dissonance between reflexive migration studies' ethical considerations and exploitative working conditions for PhD and post-doc researchers at the European universities. This should be the subject of a critique of the university as a neoliberal institution. Instead, I would like to pose a broader question about the role of the university as a societal institution and, subsequently, the location of (reflexive) migration studies within the university. From Gurminder Bhambra and colleagues (Bhambra et al. 2018), we have learned that universities have a long history of exercising colonial domination. Thus, they have contributed in different ways to the reproduction of colonial knowledge over centuries, for example, by erasing colonial histories and the histories of migration, which until recently have not been seen as part of the national histories of European states.

Moreover, relying on Bhambra and others, one should be cautious about the potential complicity of researchers with the reproduction of imperiality and coloniality of migration and their integration in the governance apparatus (Mayblin and Turner 2021). Therefore, it seems important to situate the *uses of reflexive and critical approaches* in migration studies in the institutional context of the university. In other words, not only the analytical angle of the theories matter, but also how we, as scholars, *use* (reflexive) theories (or not) at the university in terms of either reproducing or questioning their contribution to dominant societal projects and imaginaries. From this point of view,

one key challenge of reflexive migration studies is to connect the reflexive debate about knowledge production on migration and integration governance with the reflexive inspection of universities' contributions to multiple forms of domination (colonial, exploitative capitalist, androcentric, to name but a few).

Reflexivity and/as Critique?

Interestingly, all four of us entered the field of migration studies through our engagement in critical migration research. It was only later that our interest for the politics and practices of migration-related knowledge production led us to discover ›reflexivity‹ in migration studies. As mentioned in the introduction, we see a risk that the distances created through a reflexive mode of knowledge production might soften and depoliticize claims of critique in migration studies. At the same time, we wonder how doing reflexivity might become a practice of (engaged) critique. How do you envision the relationship between reflexivity and critique?

Anna Amelina: As mentioned above, I use the expressions ›reflexive‹ and ›critical‹ in migration studies synonymously, and I prefer to avoid a dichotomy between the two notions. However, we can heuristically differentiate between theories that label themselves ›critical‹ (such as discourse-oriented, neo-Marxist and decolonial approaches) and knowledge-production approaches that label themselves ›reflexive‹ (e.g., Dahinden and Anderson 2021). The former explicitly criticizes dehumanizing outcomes of migration and integration governance by disclosing discursive problematizations of the figure of the migrant (Wodak 2008; Kofman 2023), questioning mechanisms of capitalist (differentiated) exploitation of people on the move (Mezzadra and Neilson 2013) and addressing the coloniality of migration and integration (Astolfo and Allsopp 2023; Mayblin and Turner 2021; Favell 2022; Fiddian-Qasmiyeh 2020, etc.). Reflexive approaches, however, emphasize signification-related meaning-making around ›migration‹ and ›integration‹ and invite us to disclose homogenizing naming practices around the figure of the migrant (Anderson 2019; Dahinden and Anderson 2021). But in disclosing naming and labeling practices, these approaches also exercise (sometimes directly and sometimes indirectly) critique in regard to the societal production of ›migration‹, ›mobility‹, ›refugeehood‹, ›integration‹, etc.

Such a heuristic differentiation allows us to better understand the different targets of ›critical‹ (critique of domination through migration and integration governance) and ›reflexive‹ (critique of epistemic domination) approaches. This also suggests that it can be beneficial *to avoid a universalization of a singular definition of critique* because reflexive approaches question the notion of a generalization or even a canonization of only one form of critique.

They warn that canonization always implies power asymmetries (in the field of knowledge production), meaning that those (emancipatory) theory projects that resist different forms of critique risk losing their emancipatory potential.

Iva Dodevska: I agree that this question implies a strong boundary between reflexivity and critique. I also find it both difficult and unnecessary to draw hard lines between the two. If one can even speak of a clearly delineated ›reflexive migration studies‹ scholarship as opposed to an equally easily identifiable and separate ›critical migration research‹ scholarship, the two have more commonalities than differences. Reflexive and critical migration scholars both deal with questions of power relations, social hierarchies, and social justice. The positionality occupied by the researcher and its importance for the process of knowledge production are equally important to both ›camps‹. Finally, they share a strong political positioning, in the sense that they take a normative standing vis-à-vis the phenomena they study, which are often intermixed with political struggles.

If pressed to identify differences, one evident matter (and for me, the only criterion that can be argued to separate the two research strands) is that while they share a similar methodological and epistemological approach, they can be distinguished by their thematic foci. Thus far, as Anna has argued, the reflexive literature has dealt to a much greater extent with the effects of *epistemic practices*, i.e., questions of knowledge and discourse on migrants and migration. Much of the literature has focused, for instance, on the categorizations that are cemented and the paradigms that are reinforced or validated when we appropriate common sense or political vocabularies. Reflexive migration literature has been instrumental in showing how these vocabularies—on which mainstream migration scholarship is often built (consider concepts such as ›migrants‹, ›identity‹, or ›integration‹)—sustain power structures that are unjust, violent and/or rooted in colonial legacies. On the other hand, critical scholarship has focused more on *material* (rather than discursive) *practices* that reinforce borders, bordering and othering. Thematically, their focus strongly overlaps with concerns that drive the actions of activist circles that sympathize with and organize around the plight of migrants, racialized people, and refugees. Critical migration research has demonstrated and uncovered states' violent practices related to detention, refoulements, externalization, pushbacks, deportations, border technologies, and securitization.

At the heart of what you probably allude to with this question, there is perhaps another difference: one might argue that self-labeled ›critical scholars‹ (or ›militant researchers‹ in the Francophone tradition) have been more politicized, as they are often activist scholars. ›Reflexive scholars‹, on the

other hand, have perhaps claimed a more ›scientific‹ position and have been less likely to link their scholarship to political struggles. If this is true, then it might explain why the reflexive literature has been more palatable compared to activist scholarship, and arguably less risky for researchers in terms of their careers. To this we should add that while the descriptor ›critical‹ comes with its epistemological and methodological baggage and is linked to specific research traditions connected to the political left, ›reflexivity‹ is seen as a more general, necessary element of any research process, not only critical. There is hardly a researcher who would say they do not employ (self-)reflexivity, which makes it less clear as to what the purpose and uniqueness of reflexive migration studies is. Even as someone who is actively engaged in reflexive migration scholarship (also in a formal capacity as a board member of the IMISCOE Standing Committee »Reflexivities in Migration Studies«), I am often frustrated at this lack of clarity in what defines a reflexive approach and what this means in the context of migration research. Being a reflexive scholar might be, then, the more comfortable of the two positions.

Maissam Nimer: I would like to highlight that the relationship between critique and reflexivity in migration studies involves a nuanced interplay. In critical migration research, critique exposes power dynamics and structural inequalities, highlighting mechanisms of state and market power that frame migrants and refugees within broader economic systems, or the ›material‹ as mentioned by Iva. This often incorporates decolonial, feminist, and critical race theory perspectives.

Reflexive migration studies, while sharing similar aims and ideally encompassing critical migration research, in practice, often focusses on themes relating to the research process itself, such as researchers' positionality and relationship to activism and policy-making. There is often less emphasis on the ›material‹ or the mechanisms of capitalist (differentiated) exploitation and on the colonial underpinnings of discourse and studies on migration and integration, as summed up by Anna. Instead, the approach provides a comprehensive understanding of knowledge production, as also noted by both of my colleagues, Iva and Anna. In my opinion, the growing interest in reflexive migration studies, compared to critical migration research, can be attributed to its broader applicability and relevance to contemporary research practices. It encourages researchers to engage with their positionality and the power dynamics inherent in the research process, fostering a more nuanced and self-aware approach.

Scholars such as Gülay Türkmen and my forthcoming chapter in an edited volume with Susan Rottmann demonstrate how integrating reflexivity through critical approaches can reveal deeper insights into migration complexities and challenge established categories and power structures. Türk-

men, in her paper on ›categorical astigmatism‹, critiques how knowledge is produced through rigid categories of migrant minorities and identity politics, incorporating class differences and intersectionality concepts (Türkmen 2024). In our forthcoming chapter, co-authored with Susan Rottmann, we examine colonial histories and postcolonial legacies in migration governance beyond Europe. We reveal the mechanisms of state and market power in a globalized context and identify spaces that may foster inter-categorical solidarity and commonalities in struggle. We advocate for a reflexive redefinition of categories, taking colonial contexts into account to expose the racialized and exclusionary ideologies embedded in migration categorizations. Our work shows that while ethnicity categories of refugees may initially shape reception policies, they do not shield migrants from broader insecurities tied to legal status and prolonged stays in Turkey as former colonial subjects, common across inter-ethnic groups (Nimer and Rottmann [2025]).

To connect reflexive migration studies with critical migration research, it is essential for both groups to analyze the hierarchization of migrants or refugees within the global economy. This involves emphasizing the position of migrants through processes of racialization and labor subordination and exploitation, within existing social, racial, and hierarchical relations. This analysis should serve as the epistemic foundation for any research carried out under the banner of reflexivity, guiding everything from the formulation of the research question to the execution of the research project and fieldwork.

Omololá S. Olarinde-Olomola: In my view, yes, critique and reflexivity can both be viewed as methodologies that permit the questioning of existing knowledge frames and that can thereby produce novel contributions. Yet, there are two key differences.

The first difference is that critique is process-driven, while reflexivity does not result from a defined process. Indeed, reflexivity requires stepping out of theoretical and methodological frames and immersing oneself into the study through understanding how our positionality shapes our academic curiosities. One common way critique has been used is to question existing knowledge by restating existing arguments to critically examine their validity (see e.g., Smart and Williams 2008). Such a critique may result, for example, in a total reversal of how we think about integration in migration studies (Schinkel 2018). Reflexivity, in contrast, involves critically examining how our positionality shapes our understanding of concepts and influences the research process, rather than solely (in)validating existing arguments. It has been used to emphasize the impact of personal biases and differences in the interpretation of well-established concepts (Olarinde et al. 2024).

The second difference between critique and reflexivity is that reflexivity permits us to use non-established frames or perspectives. This makes reflexivity appeal to scholarship that aims at decentering and decoloniality. The appeal of reflexivity lies in its capacity to critique existing conceptual and theoretical frameworks while introducing new assumptions derived from specific contexts not previously addressed in mainstream literature. For example, Schinkel (2018) critically examined the philosophical and linguistic constructions of immigrant integration. While not explicitly labeling his methodology as ›reflexive,‹ he illustrates how it can challenge and expand traditional notions. Reflexivity allows scholars to acknowledge and address individual and societal biases at all stages of the research process, making it a particularly relevant and applied concept. I agree that both critical and reflexive approaches can be complementary so that reflexivity becomes critical.

Conclusion and Outlook

We thank Anna Amelina (AA), Iva Dodevska (ID), Maissam Nimer (MN), and Omololá S. Olarinde-Olomola (OO) for their detailed and inspiring answers that emphasize the context-dependence and situatedness of the concepts of reflexivity and critique. Bringing in their different positionalities, perspectives, and experiences in the field of migration studies, they point to the multiple ways of understanding and applying these concepts in migration research. For us, their contributions also highlight the ambivalences that come with the current boom of reflexive migration studies.

Against this background, we read their answers as making a strong case for doing reflexivity beyond »narcissistic confessions« (OO). Observing the increasing use of a »superficial ›add reflexivity and stir‹ approach« (MN), they convincingly show from their rich and diverse experiences how reflexivity can become a »central component« of ethically sound research on migration (MN) and lead to a constant awareness of the unease with the knowledge we produce as migration researchers (ID). In this sense, doing reflexivity constantly reminds us of the »embeddedness of scientific knowledge in social, political and institutional conditions of its formation« and its complicity with migration governance (AA, ID).

We also learn that the current demand for more reflexivity generates its own powerful consequences. It risks creating new hierarchies and artificial boundaries among migration scholars (ID). Predominantly emerging in academia in the Global North, reflexivity seeks to set new standards in international migration scholarship, which might come with its own unquestioned epistemological biases and Eurocentric assumptions (OO). While reflexivity as a purely academic exercise helps us to rethink one's concepts and theories

and to question taken-for-granted assumptions (OO), it seems important to consider for whom it is actually relevant and who profits from participating in such an academic exercise. In other words, who can afford to do reflexive migration studies? Pointing out that (reflexive) migration studies are still predominantly conducted by scholars in the Global North (ID), we wonder where (potential) »spaces for non-Western knowledge production« (OO) are in reflexive migration research.

Finally, their contributions also direct our attention to the material and institutional conditions of doing reflexivity. In this respect, they raise the question whether practicing reflexivity in migration studies can become a critical endeavor under the prevailing conditions of precarious academic labor. Is it at all possible to conduct reflexive migration research within a university system that is (and always has been) entangled with multiple forms of domination (AA)? How can the field disentangle itself from migration governance and violent forms of border control? Or will it »always be stuck in methodological nationalism and complicit with how states deal with mobility« (ID), and, therefore, needs to be abolished? And then, what would come after migration studies? In lieu of a conclusion, the answers leave us with the unruly question and continuous task: How can we practice reflexivity critically?

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