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Why History Matters to Understand Current Migrations and What Makes it Difficult to Transfer Long-Term Knowledge to the Current Political Debates

Abstract

Based on Oltmer's perspective of negotiation in observing current debates on migration and the need to contextualize them, this article focuses on methodological negotiations between historical and social science migration research. It shows the extent to which the discursive framing of migration as a threat and a problem is often repeated in ignorance of and contrary to the empirical evidence of historical processes and developments. In doing so, it identifies three central obstacles: 1) the tendency to view the past as fundamentally different, 2) disciplinary short-sightedness that hinders interdisciplinary cooperation, and 3) the »modernization fallacy«, which assumes revolutionary breaks in migration behavior with each new epoch. It is argued that overcoming these obstacles is crucial for a more nuanced and informed understanding of current migration regimes and networks.

Keywords

Migration history, methodological negotiations, disciplinary boundaries, social science research, framing of migration

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Warum Geschichte für das Verständnis gegenwärtiger Migrationsbewegungen wichtig ist und was den Transfer von Langzeitwissen in die aktuellen politischen Debatten erschwert

Zusammenfassung

Ausgehend von Oltmers Perspektive der Aushandlung bei der Beobachtung gegenwärtiger Debatten um Migration und der Notwendigkeit ihrer Kontextualisierung widmet sich der Beitrag den methodologischen Aushandlungen zwischen geschichts- und gesellschaftswissenschaftlicher Migrationsforschung. Dabei zeigt er, inwiefern die diskursive Rahmung von Migration als Bedrohung und Problem häufig in Unkenntnis und entgegen der Empirie historischer Prozesse und Entwicklungen wiederholt wird. Der Beitrag identifiziert drei zentrale Hürden: 1) die Tendenz, die Vergangenheit als grundlegend anders zu betrachten, 2) eine disziplinäre Kurzsichtigkeit, die interdisziplinäre Zusammenarbeit erschwert, und 3) den »Modernisierungsirrtum«, der von revolutionären Brüchen im Migrationsverhalten mit jeder neuen Epoche ausgeht. Er argumentiert, dass die Überwindung dieser Hindernisse entscheidend für ein differenzierteres und fundierteres Verständnis der aktuellen Migrationsregime und -netzwerke ist.

Schlagwörter

Migrationsgeschichte, methodologische Aushandlungen, disziplinäre Grenzen, Framing von Migration

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In his essay »Migration aushandeln«, Jochen Oltmer (2018) not only gives a thoughtful and wide-ranging overview of how scholars and society define and understand »migration«, but also shows why it is difficult to talk about migration in the public debate in a way that does justice to scholarly insights. He not only points to the one-sided obsession with human mobility by politicians and media but also to the often isolated and highly specialized pillarization of the scholarly migration field.

In this contribution I will focus more specifically on the question of methodological negotiations between historical and more contemporary social science migration research in terms of insights and mechanisms that migration historians have produced in the past decades. One tension that Oltmer indicates is that at the political and societal level people tend to limit

their definitions and understanding of migration to those expressions they find worrisome or outright dangerous for receiving societies. How migration is defined and which elements are considered problematic change over time and are the object of political framing, with »replacement« as the most recent example. In this essay, I will expand on Oltmer's excellent arguments by focusing on the difficulty of historical knowledge being accepted as relevant to understanding current migration regimes and networks. I will also discuss the most important hurdles migration historians must overcome to get their insights understood and applied.

1 Why Care About Migration in the Past?

As Oltmer rightly states, geographical mobility and its short- and long-term effects on those who move, those with whom they interact, and those they leave behind, have been a structural aspect of human societies ever since humans moved in and out of Africa, some 60,000 years ago (Lucassen et al. 2010).

The vast knowledge that has been collected over time by a wide range of scholarly disciplines allows historians to intervene in current debates, not with the aim to prescribe what should be done, or predict what will happen, but to explain what factors determine why and what kind of people move, and which factors will be the most likely outcomes of settlement processes in the short and long term.

Migration history as a sub-discipline of social (and economic) history emerged in the late 1970s and was inspired by—among others—American social science scholars like Charles Tilly and Aristide Zolberg, many of whom applied various kinds of social science theories, perspectives and methods (Lucassen and Lucassen 1997). Furthermore migration historians, often in close collaboration with social scientists, argued that present day migrations and the settlement process of newcomers had much more in common with earlier experiences than many people realized (Foner 2000; Lucassen 2005). This resulted in a large body of knowledge, solidified in major syntheses (Hoerder 2002; Bade et al. 2012; Borges et al. 2023).

To summarize briefly, migration historians have convincingly shown the normality of migration, both internal and international, and debunked the notion that migration is uprooting as well as leading to lasting ethnic isolation and ghetto formation. Furthermore, they have argued that over generations, ethnic differences fade and boundaries blur and shift (Alba 2006). The only serious hurdles to integration over time are societies that severely limit the access to key institutions, such as citizenship, parts of the labor, housing,

and marriage market, and associational life.[1] A wealth of studies worldwide show that it is primarily the lack of open access of receiving societies—or in other words systemic discrimination and systemic and state-driven forms of segregation (like the South African Apartheid regime)—that explains patterns of minority formation and failed integration.

2 Disciplinary Hurdles

The political atmosphere, however, is not the only impediment. In order for crucial insights from historical migration studies to blossom, we also need to overcome deeply rooted persuasions about the scope and epistemic boundaries of the historical discipline in general and that of migration history in particular.

Assuming that history is an integral part of the social sciences and vice versa leads to the conclusion that historians and social scientists share the same long-term, epistemic space that allows us to lay bare all kinds of basic human behavior and social mechanisms. The challenge, however, is to recognize similar expressions in countless disguises and to link them to prevailing societal structures, ranging from labor relations (Lucassen 2021; Eltis 2025) to membership regimes (Benhabib 2004). Focused on migration, Patrick Manning, for example, has distinguished four main types of what he calls »cross community migrations« among humans in the past 100,000 years. These allow us to compare expressions and effects of migration over time and space, while stressing the fundamental and structural function of migration for social change (Manning and Trimmer 2000; for a slightly modified version, see Lucassen and Lucassen 2017).

Nevertheless, many historians object to such an approach because it would simplify an infinite range of different human behavior and neglects highly specific historical contexts. Although context obviously matters, this need not necessarily contradict the position of social science history. To the contrary, distinguishing political, economic, cultural, and ecological structures is crucial to understand under what conditions certain migratory behavior and settlement processes occurred. Seyla Benhabib's (2004) »membership regimes« concept, for example, combined with Douglas North's (2002) notion of »access orders« help us to understand why South Asian labor migrants in Gulf States encounter very different receiving societies than their relatives in much more »open access« (European) liberal democracies, and hence are much more limited to settle and interact with the native popula-

1 Think, for example, of African Americans in the US and labor migrants in the Gulf States.

tion.[2] Another, more overarching, significant membership regime is the national state. Although it did not fundamentally change the basic drivers of migration, it created control and surveillance institutions (Torpey 2000) and redefined who is considered a member of a polity and has access to its political and social rights. Whereas in early modern societies, especially in Western Europe but also in other parts of the world (Prak 2018), cities largely defined who they accepted and on what grounds. This shifted in the 19th century to the nation-state, which defined membership much more in ethnic terms, drawing the boundaries based on different criteria than previously.

The use of social science concepts by historians based on the persuasion that these are common elements in basic human behavior, however, is not widely accepted. I distinguish three (intertwined) disciplinary hurdles.

2.1 The Past as a Foreign Country

In 1897, the Anglican priest and well-known Scottish economic historian at King's College London, William Cunningham (1849–1919), published his book »*Alien Immigrants to England*«. In his overview, he praised the contribution of Dutch, Flemish and French Huguenot weavers, artisans, and merchants in the 16th and 17th centuries. However, when it came to the migrants of his own time, Jewish refugees from (Polish) Russia, he was much less complimentary (Cunningham 1897, p. xix, 266).

This juxtaposition of »good« migrants in the past and »bad« migrants in the present remains a recurring phenomenon to this day and is largely explained by the way journalists, politicians, and social scientists, implicitly or explicitly, understand their discipline, and hence, to what extent they view historical knowledge as unique and specific for certain periods and places. This interpretation is rooted in a long historicist tradition that considers the (distant) past as a foreign country, which is so different from our own time that comparisons are per definition flawed if not utterly useless.

Within this narrative tradition (which is largely shared by the broader public), there is a strong tendency to view migrations in the past through rose-colored or sepia glasses. Distance in time tends to smooth and romanticize many migratory experiences framed in a »poor but happy« or »good« migrants then and »bad« migrants now perspective.

2.2 Disciplinary Myopia

The idea that history can be considered a laboratory that enables us to detect regularities in how and why people, such as forced and organizational mi-

2 For an application of these concepts, see Lucassen 2013; Lucassen and Lucassen 2017.

grants, (Lucassen and Smit 2015) (colonists, soldiers, sailors, diplomats, missionaries) in search of powerful institutions may raise eyebrows among historians who define migration as ordinary people who move to settle abroad. Social scientists, who (implicitly) share the assumption that »the past is a foreign country« may also be skeptical, but for slightly different reasons. While studying the contemporary world, they are easily locked in and mesmerized by the present (including the very recent past), which leaves no time or curiosity to even care about comparisons in time. Others, who recognize the general nature of migratory processes, have insufficient historical knowledge to appreciate its relevance for the present.

Disciplinary boundaries, however, need not stand in the way of both historians and social scientists using each other's analytical tools, data, and sources, and there are many examples of social scientists who fundamentally contributed to long-term analyses. One trailblazer was Charles Tilly (1978), who was highly influential in historicizing core social scientist topics like social movements and state formation. Others, like sociologists Ewa Morawska (1996) and Roger Waldinger (2007), anthropologist Nancy Foner (2000), political scientist James Hollifield (Hollifield and Foley 2022), and geographer Colin Pooley (Pooley and Turnbull 1998), to mention a few, followed in Tilly's wake and published important studies, showing that migration and settlement processes in the past are much more alike than many scholars and the broader public realize and are, therefore, highly relevant for understanding the present (see also Foner and Lucassen 2012).

2.3 The Modernization Fallacy

It is no coincidence that the birth of social sciences, as we know them today, coincided with the industrialization and urbanization processes in the second half of the 19th century. Scholars like Émile Durkheim (1858–1917) in France and Ferdinand Tönnies (1855–1936) in Germany were greatly impressed by the mass migration from the countryside to cities (both internal and transatlantic) and the unprecedented speed of the urbanization process.

In order to understand how these changes affected the people involved, they coined crucial concepts such as »anomy« and »Gemeinschaft und Gesellschaft«. Both assumed that before »modernization«, most people were more or less immobile, living in rural or small town face-to-face communities, with strong family ties. Due to industrialization, however, mass migration uprooted millions of people who had to adjust their lives fundamentally, with many falling through the cracks, leading to serious social problems. They believed that the dissolvement of traditional social ties in urban slums led to an increase in suicide and disintegrating social cohesion; a theme that essentially informed the sociologists of the Chicago School like Ernest Bur-

gess, Everett Hughes, and Robert E. Park. More recently, many historians have debunked the uprooted-assumption and replaced it with the notion of transplanted networks, while stressing the continuity between the early modern and the modern period (Tilly 1990; see also Lucassen 1987; Moch 1992).

Since Durkheim and Tönnies, new »modernizations« have taken their place, each claiming a revolutionary break with the past, like »globalization« and most recently the »digital revolution«. Each makes the assumption that these fundamentally change migratory behavior and the ensuing settlement processes. Hence new theories and concepts like »transnationalism« (Portes et al. 1999), »segmented assimilation« (Portes and Zhou 1993), »superdiversity« (Vertovec 2007), and »liquid modernity« (Bauman 2000) arose. Although they all provide new insights, these concepts—just like those of Durkheim, Tönnies and Park—too easily lead to dichotomous juxtapositions that cloud underlying continuities and similarities with earlier periods.

3 Conclusion

In the spirit of Oltmer's »Aushandeln« perspective, I hope to have demonstrated that migration history is crucial to understand the present, because it gives us access to a giant time-space laboratory. Provided that we use standardized definitions and systematic comparisons, it allows us to discover regularities in migratory and settlement patterns. The time-space laboratory is also crucial to systematically identify the variants of open and closed access to key societal institutions and their consequences. Together these much broader insights are important to expand the current debate and go beyond the negative obsession with migrations and the xenophobic framing of behavior that is deeply embedded in the human nature.

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