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From Studying Migration to Researching Society: Transcending the Migration-State Nexus as Task and Challenge

Abstract

Departing from Jochen Oltmer's interpretation of historical migration regimes as complex and asymmetrical negotiations of basic rights, entitlements and social recognition, this article examines the analytical significance of the state and state-produced source material in the study of migration. It does so by questioning the epistemic duality between migration and the state. By placing society at the center of attention, I suggest that we should understand the role that migration plays in shaping society as a whole.

Keywords

Migration regimes, migration history, knowledge production, society

Von der Migrations- zur Gesellschaftsforschung. Die Überwindung des Nexus von Staat und Migration als Aufgabe und Herausforderung

Zusammenfassung

Ausgehend von Jochen Oltmers Interpretation historischer Migrationsregime als komplexe und asymmetrische Aushandlungen von Grundrechten, Ansprüchen und sozialer Teilhabe untersucht dieser Artikel die analytische Bedeutung des Staates und staatlich produzierten Quellenmaterials für die Migrationsforschung. Hierzu stellt er die epistemische Dualität von Migration und Staat in Frage und rückt stattdessen Gesellschaft als Kategorie ins Zentrum der Analyse. Nur so kann das Verständnis dafür geschärft werden,

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welche Rolle Migration für die Entwicklung von Gesellschaft insgesamt spielt.

Schlagwörter

Migrationsregime, Migrationsgeschichte, Wissensproduktion, Gesellschaft

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Since the 1990s, scholarship in the social sciences and humanities has undergone profound epistemological and methodological transformations. In view of the end of the Cold War, the acceleration of European integration and the rapid traction of capitalist liberalism with its corresponding ideology of a potentially unbound world opened up an intellectual space that urged historians and social scientists alike to conceptualize movement beyond the perspectives of states and ideological blocs. The epistemic challenge was to develop analytical approaches that would allow us to reconsider the place, role and meaning of states in a world that was increasingly perceived as »global«, based on a complex interplay of a multitude of actors, groups and institutions that pursued their aims above and beyond the nation state. In this context, the movement of people played a substantial role, both in understanding the phenomenon under investigation and in conceptualizing perspectives that could do justice to the complex spatial imaginations that scholarship began to trace. Since then, the relationship between nationalism, cross-border interactions, administrative infrastructures and academic knowledge production is at the heart of much research on transnational or global phenomena. This holds especially true for migration research and its aim to understand how the movement of groups and individuals across borders contributes to the constant re-formation of social order in Europe and at the global level. Given the crucial role played by racialized citizenship laws, border policies or ethnicized concepts of (non-)belonging, migration research faces the task of reflecting on ways to conceptualize and empirically grasp the causes and effects of migration-related phenomena without automatically foregrounding the national framework.

Taking as a starting point Jochen Oltmer's interpretation of historical migration regimes as complex negotiations between a multitude of state-related (institutional) actors and those categorized as »migrants«, I will discuss the epistemological challenge of acknowledging the powerful role of states in drafting and implementing migration regimes without replicating an interpretative framework that depicts certain migrant populations as the different, to-be-integrated other (Favell 2022). I will focus particularly on migration history, which tends to rely on state-produced source material, and suggest

shifting attention from the state to society as the main analytical category. This endeavor makes it necessary to consider the dependence of academic knowledge production on state-produced source material, and what this means for any effort to recalibrate how we analytically situate the state in migration processes. To this end, I will briefly explore the challenges in developing analytical approaches that scrutinize the relationship between movement, space, social order and knowledge production, followed by a discussion of how the conceptual framework of migration regimes presents the nexus between the state and migration. In the final section, I engage with recent publications and propose that we dissolve this particular nexus by inverting the perspective from studying migration to studying society through the lens of migration.

Let us begin with a brief glance at discussions on the role of state perspectives and its intertwining with knowledge production that have been influential in migration studies. The debate about the political and sometimes problematic implications of the concepts, terms and methodologies used in migration research is certainly not new. As early as the 2000s, Andreas Wimmer and Nina Glick Schiller drew attention to the analytical pitfalls and consequences of a research design that equates »the national order of things« with how scholars define their research object, both analytically and empirically (Wimmer and Glick Schiller 2002). Since then, several approaches have been developed to provide thoughtful, critical analyses of how state-organized societies deal with moving subjects without relinquishing analytical distance to the use of terms, concepts and methodologies. Most notably, reflexive migration research has embarked on the project of engaging with the enmeshment of academic knowledge production with societal discourses on migration and policy measures. The overall aim is to transform the conceptual framework of migration studies from one that perceives of migration-related otherness as a purportedly given social fact to one that takes othering as a starting point for studying the social production of migration-related differences (Nieswand and Drotbohm 2014; Amelina 2021).

Yet translating these concepts into empirical research is another matter. For the modern period, the reasons are easy to trace. Nation-building and the nation-state have provided powerful conceptions of the territorial, political and social order of society that continue to structure thinking in historiography, social theory and the social sciences to this day. In his 2018 article, Jochen Oltmer highlighted the intertwining of historical tradition with the nation-state as a key reason for the ongoing relevance of national frameworks in historical and social science research on migration. Since the early 19th century, two core features of modern statehood have been the increasing acquisition of data on the demographic and social composition of the popula-

tion of a particular territory and the stepwise identification of society with a territorially bound nation-state. Historians have explored these processes in depth, showing how the administrative penetration of territorially defined spaces, in tandem with population policies, provided the basis for understanding peoples and territories as national and ethnic phenomena. Furthermore, these studies have advanced our understanding of the impact of these processes on the production of academic knowledge and on how this nexus promoted the consolidation of nationalized imaginaries and practices (The Population Knowledge Network 2016).

In migration research, a key aspect of this debate orbits around the disparity between the institutional, at times comprehensive production of knowledge on migration on the one hand, and the limited documentation produced by migrants on the other, and researchers' opportunities to read archives against the grain (Ibreck et al. 2024). While migrants do appear in local, regional or state archives, this perspective is severely limited because their voices are mostly refracted through the lens of a state. This is because modern states recorded them, set the premises for these interactions (e.g. policing and surveilling the movement of people), and handed down migrant voices through a particular classification scheme that prescribed an interpretative framework. There were, of course, notable exceptions in this regard: for example, migrants who had the means to produce and disseminate documents about their actions and experiences; however, these documents are dwarfed by the volume of what state-related archives provide. Moreover, state-induced tradition reflects the highly asymmetrical relationship between moving people, national border regimes, and state institutions that increasingly used their power to confer status on moving people (as legal or illegal, as refugee or student, as expat or migrant laborer) and thus substantiated practices of categorizing and hierarchizing people through extensive documentation. Against this background, a major task for migration history has been and still is to find conceptual ways to »enclose« state perspectives within an analytical and empirical framework that is able to productively decentralize state-generated source material despite the continuing centrality of these archives for our own knowledge production.

Studies on the relationship between the state and migration have yielded different answers to this conceptual challenge, yet they all face the same litmus test: how to relate the moving subjects with state institutions in analytical terms, how to assign and conceptualize agency, how to establish causality and how to constitute an appropriate body of source material. The primary challenge is to develop a bird's-eye view of a specific migration situation at a particular moment in time, while remaining aware of the continuing dominance of state-produced knowledge when analyzing migration regimes and

the persistent power asymmetries this perpetuates, which can have an immense, even lethal, effect on the lives of those labeled as migrants. Reflexive migration research has addressed these issues. This branch of research strongly urges us to transform these profound epistemological challenges into a resource for self-reflexive, power-sensitive research that aims to reverse the gaze. Rather than analytically reproducing mechanisms of societal exclusion by focusing on phenomena and groups that are overwhelmingly categorized as migrant, research should trace how processes of migrantisation work, investigate their role in processes of group formation and collective identification, and consider how, consciously or not, we as researchers contribute to or amplify these practices (Stielike et al. 2024; Dahinden 2016).

Jochen Oltmer has approached this issue from a distinct historical perspective. Taking the concept of migration regime as his starting point, he intends to refine how we can understand the interrelation between state practices, the physical movement of people labeled as migrants, and knowledge production. His argument departs from the idea that modern migration regimes consist of institutionalized power relations that create apparatuses to control migration processes through norms, structures and organizational procedures. This perspective contrasts with other approaches in the field that highlight the contextual nature of migration regimes, emphasizing the way in which (state) institutions are embedded in multidimensional and contingent contexts in which various (institutional) actors (state, non-state, private and international) compete to govern the movement of people including migrants (Pott et al. 2018). However, if we follow Oltmer, migration regimes evolved around state institutions, and they were key in developing and configuring this dense network of regulations, institutions and bodies of knowledge. Accordingly, his analytical focus is on institutional actors, their scope of action, and their attempts to frame migration events through practices such as collecting and categorising knowledge (and people) and creating rules and procedures—in short, setting the stage for the transformation of physical movement into a socially relevant event with structural and discursive significance. In Oltmer's reading, migrants do not count as part of the regime. The exercise of power over them is based on asymmetrical relationships that nevertheless remain subject to contestation, negotiation and modification. Nonetheless, they remain subject to contestation, negotiation and modification. This is where migrants come into the picture, defying institutional policies by moving, pursuing their vision of life and developing strategies to navigate (mostly restrictive) regulations and governance schemes. Therefore, Oltmer emphasizes the crucial role of individuals in the co-production of migration, suggesting that we should focus on the relationship between migrant individuals and institutional settings in

specific contexts so that we can better understand how migrants and migration regimes struggle over rules, norms and measures in concrete situations (Oltmer 2018).

However, even though this view of the encounters and interactions between state-induced migration regimes and people categorized as »migrants« factors in power imbalances and stark asymmetries, this analytical approach may lead us to underestimate how these interactions can sometimes assume an existential dimension for those who are in search of access rights, residence permits and legal entitlements that would enable them to participate in society. At the same time, this perspective tends to present state-led migration regimes and migration/migrants as analytically distinct entities that impact each other only to a certain degree. This means translating a distinctly modern way of thinking about the relationship between the state and mobile people into the research design. Juxtaposing the concepts of the state and migration, however, has a substantial impact on scholarly knowledge production on migration. This upholds an epistemological duality between the state and its migration-producing apparatuses on the one hand, and the people categorized as migrants based on specific ethnic, religious, social or political attributes on the other. However, thinking in these binary terms transfers political concepts of state—with all of their inherent strengths and weaknesses—into scholarly debates. On the one hand, such an approach will certainly identify the patterns that drive the highly uneven interplay between people on the move, their institutional governance and how it affects and structures migration-related inequality. On the other hand, this dichotomous mode of thinking risks adopting political imaginations of migration and migrants as non-belonging, as the socio-cultural »other« and thus reiterating instead of scrutinizing this thinking by means of academic knowledge production.

How can the production of scholarly knowledge on migration transcend the migration-state nexus, even when it relies heavily on source material produced by state actors that unavoidably present a biased perspective on migration? A major shift in perspective would entail turning attention from the state to society and examining how restrictive discourses on migration shape social norms and interactions of groups categorized as »normal« or »non-migrant« (Heins and Wolff 2023). Such a shift in perspective would enable researchers to consider the multidirectional effects of the norms and values inherent in migration policies, and to analyze how they affect society by creating social fault lines beyond migration policies. This necessitates an intersectional approach, combining an assessment of migration-related politics with an examination of other how social difference is produced. The question then becomes how, why and with what consequences various cate-

gories of difference—such as class, gender, ethnicity, race, age, health, place and language—emerge, and how they create multiple hierarchies and dividing lines that generate asymmetrical relations between different segments of society.

Such a perspective enquires into the practices and policies of stigmatization and what they tell us about the norms, values, and contemporary »truths« of the non-problematized majority; this topic has proven to be particularly fruitful when it comes to reconsidering the history of Western European democracies since 1945. Stefanie Schüler-Springorum offers a powerful example in her study of the restructuring of West German society after the Holocaust. By analyzing this process »from the margins«—focusing on the exemplary cases of Jews, Sinti and Roma, former forced laborers from Eastern Europe, and German homosexuals—she argues that antisemitism, racism, and homophobia played a significant role in establishing »the centre of society« (Schüler-Springorum 2024, p. 23). She does so by analyzing how antisemitism and racism aligned in a shared distrust of West German society against these groups, and how these misgivings later continued to materialize in the form of discrimination against labor migrants from Southern Europe. Schüler-Springorum focuses on understanding the strategies of collective self-justification, of setting gender norms and of deliberating concepts of the societal self that require »the other« as an indispensable foil for its own elaboration.

Lauren Stokes has reached similar conclusions. In a remarkable study on family migration to West Germany, she argues that debates surrounding family migration, social belonging and citizenship served political purposes that transcended the public focus on migration to address society as such. These purposes included the reinforcement of gendered divisions of labor, the adjustment and rearticulation of racialized differences in the context of the post-war era, and the establishment of a particular vision of the welfare state in which care responsibilities were privatized (Stokes 2022). By inverting the perspective and investigating the role of marginalizing policies for the ethnically defined majority, both studies reveal the fundamental constraints that shaped democratization processes in Western European societies. They argue that marginalization was essential in shaping concrete visions of democracy. In this context, the asymmetrical treatment of migrants and marginalized groups substantially served to draft and implement norms, values, and practices that disciplined the majority, in particular the female majority, and allowed it to achieve a common self-perception. By understanding the crucial functions that discourses on and institutional control of migration performed for the reconfiguration of West German postwar society, both authors allow us to reconsider narratives of democratization and

their supposed success stories. They urge us to recognize the major role of resentment and exclusion for establishing societal consensus on norms, values, and living practices that stretch beyond the legal and political schemes that govern migration.

It is essential that we continue to direct our attention to how we can adopt an analytical approach to the relationship between state and migration, one that dissolves conceptual binaries and considers the predominance of state-produced source material. Rather than focusing on the relationship between regimes and migrant populations, I propose shifting the focal point to understanding how migration-related discrimination affects social relations and the basic functions it performs for constituting society. This allows us to take a more nuanced and critical view of the grand post-war narratives, such as the democratization of Western Europe (and it being threatened by migration). From this perspective, migration no longer appears as society's »other«, but as an essential form of societal self-description that is based on highly unequal negotiations of belonging and its parameters. This discourse unfolds at the heart of society, and it calls for a different set of analytical skills to describe and interpret migration-related differences. This includes handling with sensitivity the sources on which our knowledge production relies. It requires integrating the voices and experiences of migrants. The aim is to overcome the analytical dichotomy between migration and society by understanding migration-related populations as being situated at the centre, rather than the margins, of society. We should begin to understand migration-related discourse as work on the self of society, to pluralize this self into selves and to conceive of migration research as social research. This would ultimately allow us to recognise the historical roots of contemporary populism and make the deep-seated illiberalism and resentment at the heart of postwar democracies (historically) intelligible.

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