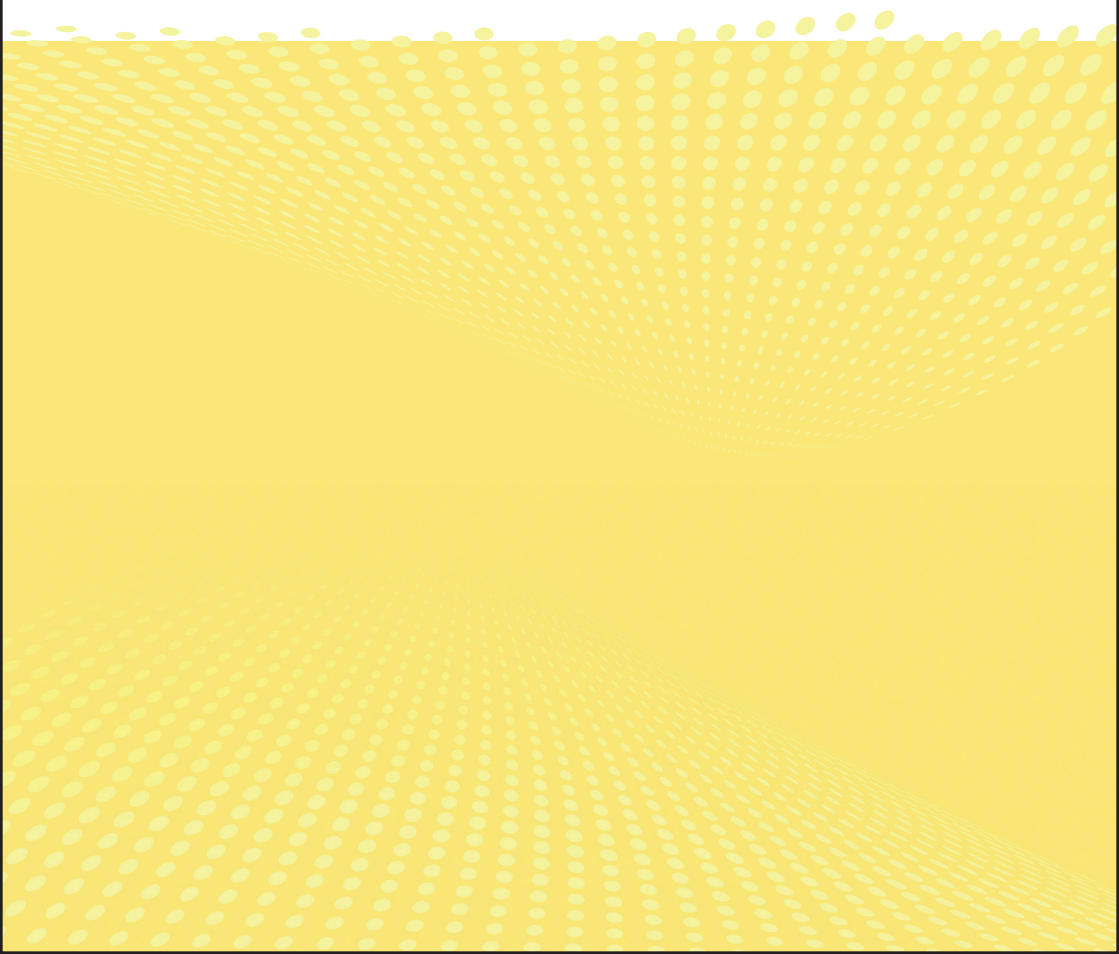


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Discussion Forum: Negotiating Migration



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Discussion Forum: Negotiating Migration

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Marcel Berlinghoff, Andreas Pott,
and David Templin

Negotiating Migration: A Critical Appraisal of Jochen Oltmer's Concept of *Aushandlung*. An Introduction

Abstract

Negotiation (*Aushandlung*) has become a central element of the longer-lasting endeavor to carve out the dynamics, mechanisms, and functions of the societal »production of migration«. One of the scholars who has continuously shaped and reflected on this is Jochen Oltmer. On the occasion of his 60th birthday, this issue starts a discussion based on one of his key articles on migration regimes and the negotiation of migration translated into English (»Migration aushandeln« 2018), followed by five contributions that engage from different epistemic, disciplinary, and methodical perspectives with the concept of negotiation as developed by Jochen Oltmer. They address key questions on the concept's analytical benefits and discuss its prospects and limits, especially regarding historical and contemporary perspectives on migration and (post-)migrant societies.

Keywords

Negotiating migration, migration regimes, production of migration, historical and contemporary migration research

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Migration aushandeln: Eine kritische Würdigung von Jochen Oltmers Konzept der Aushandlung. Eine Einführung

Zusammenfassung

Das Konzept der Aushandlung von Migration ist zu einem zentralen Element der längerfristigen Bemühungen geworden, die Dynamiken, Mechanismen und Funktionen der gesellschaftlichen »Produktion von Migration« herauszuarbeiten. Maßgeblich geprägt und fortlaufend reflektiert wurde und wird das Konzept von Jochen Oltmer. Anlässlich seines 60. Geburtstags beginnen wir in dieser Ausgabe eine Diskussion über Potentiale und Grenzen des Konzepts für die Migrationsforschung: Welche analytischen Vorteile gewährt die Perspektive der Aushandlung? Wie passen historische und gegenwärtige Deutungsrahmen zusammen und was bedeutet das für unsere Debatten in Migrations- oder auch postmigrantischen Gesellschaften? Auf Grundlage des ins Englische übersetzten Aufsatzes »Migration aushandeln« (2018) von Jochen Oltmer versammelt das vorliegende Heft hierzu fünf unterschiedliche epistemologische, disziplinäre und methodische Perspektiven auf Aushandlung.

Schlagwörter

Aushandlung von Migration, Migrationsregime, Produktion von Migration, historische und zeitgenössische Migrationsforschung

* * * * *

Migration is omnipresent and yet difficult to grasp. In current public and political debates, it is primarily addressed as a problem that needs to be managed, controlled, and, in case of doubt, pushed back. In addition, most debates only refer to a very small portion of cross-border mobility. Those parts of the migration phenomenon that do not seem to fit into the problem discourse are largely ignored. Strikingly, up-to-date sedentariness is regarded as the norm, against which migration appears as an exception. However, looking back at history helps us to understand that migration has always been »normal« (Bade and Oltmer 2004), and an essential part of human societies. A historical perspective also sharpens our understanding of the processual nature of migration, its contingency, and its changing meanings.

Migration researchers have developed various approaches to address and better understand the different causes, forms, and consequences of human mobility. For analyzing the complexity and the dynamics of the societal production of migration, the heuristic concept of migration regimes has

proven beneficial (Pott et al. 2018). The application and further development of this research perspective, particularly in historical migration studies, owes much to the work of our colleague, Jochen Oltmer. He has conceived migration regimes as »integrated fields of the shaping and activity of institutional actors which focus on a specific aspect of migration processes, channel migration movements and categorize migrants and potential migrants« (Oltmer 2018, p. 246 f.). Following this approach, a web of various more-or-less powerful actors that are involved in categorizing, forming, and regulating human mobility as migration, as well as their practices, rationalities, interests and interrelations need to be considered.

Indeed, Jochen Oltmer's contribution to the debate on migration regimes has extended beyond this conceptual clarification. He proposed thinking of migration as an ongoing negotiation (*Aushandlung*) between different institutional actors and migrants. It is assumed that the various actors that are involved in this process interact, negotiate, and thereby mold the relevant frameworks, forms, and meanings of migration in conflictual as well as cooperative relationships. Based on the work of sociologist Andreas Wimmer (2005), the concept of *Aushandlung* thus draws attention to the processes and interrelated practices that bring about migration as a social fact. Although national policies are important and influential, politicians and states are just some of the many actors involved. The focus on negotiations offers a fruitful perspective for analyzing not only the processes of continuity in migration regimes, but also conflict and change, in particular by stressing the contributions and impacts of those who are referred to as migrants. Whether migrants themselves are regarded as part of the migration regime or as interacting with the regime in an arena of negotiation, a position suggested by Oltmer, has been controversial (for the different positions: Pott et al. 2018).

On the occasion of Jochen Oltmer's 60th birthday, we translated one of his key articles on migration regimes and the negotiation of migration into English (»Migration aushandeln« 2018). We invited five colleagues from different disciplines and academic backgrounds to engage with his core ideas, critically reflect on them, and expand his concepts. In this way, the following discussion forum deliberately makes central aspects of the German-language debate on the negotiation of migration accessible to a broader international academic community.

* * * * *

Since the publishing of Oltmer's article in 2018, the debate at the interdisciplinary Institute for Migration Research and Intercultural Studies (IMIS) at Osnabrück University, where Oltmer is based, has evolved further. Negotia-

tion (*Aushandlung*) has become a central element of the longer-lasting endeavor to carve out the dynamics, mechanisms, and functions of the societal »production of migration«. Since 2024, the Collaborative Research Center (*Sonderforschungsbereich*) SFB 1604, funded by the German Research Foundation (DFG), has been devoted to examining the production of migration. As one of its principal investigators, Jochen Oltmer has used this opportunity to further elaborate a reflexive aspect that is already entailed in his understanding of negotiation: the importance of migration-related knowledge and knowledge production.

One group of actors who produce migration-related knowledge and who negotiate and participate in the societal production of migration are (social) scientists and migration researchers. The »reflexive turn« in migration research has led academics in the past decade to increasingly question their own role in the categorization of »migrants«, in knowledge circulation and the dissemination of certain images and ideas of migration (Nieswand and Drotbohm 2014; Stielike et al. 2024). Through the development of scientific concepts, such as »integration«, »diversity« or »push and pull factors«, migration researchers have contributed to the production of migration and are involved in negotiations over how to frame, interpret, and deal with migration processes.

One central component of such a self-reflection of migration research in Germany would be a historicization of this interdisciplinary field of research, which dates back to studies on emigration in the late 19th century, the »expellee research« of the post-war decades (Ruhkopf 2023) and the »guest worker research« of the following years (Bommes 2010; Marschalck 2004; as a contemporary critique: Griese 1984). In the case of Switzerland, Kijan Espahangizi (2022) examined the nexus of social research, initiatives from civil society and political institutions in creating a »migration-integration complex« while Christiane Reinecke (2021) pointed to the role of social scientists in promoting segregation and »ghetto« discourses that shaped local migration politics in France and West Germany. Of course, the historical contextualization also proves relevant for the Institute for Migration Research and Intercultural Studies (IMIS), which was founded in 1990 when the demand for research on »foreigners« and »migrants« was growing in the context of increasing societal arguments and conflicts over migration in Germany (as a retrospective reflection on the 10th anniversary of IMIS see: Oltmer 2002).

It is in this institutional context that Jochen Oltmer's work has to be understood—a framework that he himself played a key role in shaping. Since the 1990s, Oltmer has become a leading figure in German migration research by publishing crucial monographs (e.g., on migration politics in the Weimar Republic and the global history of migration; see Oltmer 2005; 2012a) and

volumes on different periods of migration history (e.g., Oltmer 2012b; Oltmer et al. 2012; Bade et al. 2012). Oltmer also speaks in public, appearing in schools, on national television, and in newspapers (e.g., Hornbacher-Schönleber 2024; Lübke 2024; Deutschlandfunk Kultur 2017). As a historian and migration scholar, he is aware that his work contributed to the societal production of migration and the ongoing negotiation of its meanings. Therefore, he has actively and extensively intervened in public discourse and often questioned dominant and stereotypical or overly simplistic interpretations. As a colleague, we perceived Oltmer's practice to be a conviction based on his knowledge of the importance of *Aushandlung* and the possibilities that negotiations opened up in changing, or at least influencing, debates on migration. However, it is an open question whether and to what extent these public interventions, for example the plea for understanding forced migration (*Flucht*) as a »constant feature of human history« (Oltmer 2023), found resonance in society and politics. This points to the larger question of the influence of academics and academic knowledge in shaping discourse and becoming influential beyond the »ivory tower« (Boswell 2009).

* * * * *

For the special focus of this discussion forum, we asked five colleagues to engage with the concept of negotiation as developed by Jochen Oltmer in the context of the migration regime approach. We asked them to bring the concept into dialogue with their own perspectives and to think beyond it: Which analytical benefits can be achieved by connecting the concept of migration regimes and negotiation? How can the concept of »negotiating migration« be developed further, and where does it reach its limits? How does Oltmer's historiographical approach resonate with contemporary perspectives on migration and (post-)migrant societies? As the preparation of this discussion forum showed, the engagement with Oltmer's contributions and his continual reworking and refinement of the migration regime and negotiation approach, also sheds light on his particular performance as a migration scholar. This is reflected in the contributions as well.

At the beginning of the subsequent collection, Jochen Oltmer's translated and updated contribution »Migration aushandeln: Perspektiven aus der Historischen Migrationsforschung« (2018) from the volume *What Is a Migration Regime?* explains the concepts of migration regimes and negotiation and demonstrates their application using historical examples. The article serves as a reference for the following authors' considerations.

Historian Christoph Rass (IMIS, Osnabrück University) begins by showing the conceptual development that Oltmer's work on migration has under-

gone over the last 30 years. By placing it in the perspective of a constantly evolving, never-ending, »infinite text«, he shows how the focus has shifted from the nation-state and migration policies to the negotiations in the migration regime and an understanding of migration as a socially produced object. Rass views Oltmer's role as that of an agenda-setter in the sense of Wimmer (2025).

This overview is followed by the commentary of sociologist Boris Nieswand (University of Tübingen), who examines Oltmer's perspectives in current (not only migration-related) sociological theories and debates. In doing so, he shows that Oltmer, coming from a historical background, incorporates contemporary sociological concepts and debates into his considerations. Conversely, Nieswand indicates how the concept of negotiation can be used for current social science approaches beyond the realm of historical knowledge—and where he sees limitations. Nieswand prefers a less strict separation in the relationship between negotiation and regime, without entering into a fundamental disagreement.

From the perspective of the concept of »post-migrant society«, sociologist Naika Foroutan (DeZIM, BIM, Humboldt University of Berlin) discusses the importance of negotiation as a constitutive democratic element. The post-migrant society is created through ongoing negotiations and the questioning of their results. These negotiations do not stop at the regulation of mobility on one side and questions of social rights and integration on the other; Jochen Oltmer speaks of »mobility regimes« and »presence regimes« as two sides of a migration regime. For Foroutan, negotiations also have a lasting impact on migrants' as well as their descendants' struggles for recognition, belonging, and identity.

With a view toward the international development of migration research and its preoccupation with historical and contemporary migration phenomena, historian Leo Lucassen (IISH Amsterdam, University of Leiden) addresses Jochen Oltmer's reflections on the utilization of the concept of negotiation. In doing so, he argues for the deeper perspective that the academic study of historical migration phenomena enables, which can also be made productive in the analysis of current negotiations of migration.

Finally, historian Isabella Löhr (Freie Universität Berlin, ZZP Potsdam) outlines a perspective that goes beyond a state-centered approach in migration research. In this sense, she critically discusses Jochen Oltmer's interpretation of historical migration regimes as complex and asymmetrical negotiations of fundamental rights, entitlements, and social participation. Löhr questions the epistemic duality of migrants and the state (with »negotiation« as a conceptual bridge between both) and proposes that society itself should instead be placed at the center of analysis.

We would like to thank all our contributors for their willingness to engage so fruitfully with what they saw as relevant aspects of *Aushandlung* in the context of the migration regime. We invite all readers to join and continue the debate. Commentaries and perspectives from other academic contexts that develop the concept further or go beyond it are particularly welcome.

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Jochen Oltmer

Negotiating Migration: An Outlook from the Perspectives of Historical Migration Research

Abstract

Since the late 1980s, historical migration research has delved into many forms and instances of migration as well as discourses on spatial movement. However, a tendency exists to focus on individual cases and experiences without attempting to integrate them or relate them to one another. Efforts to offer new, overarching, and integrating perspectives by engaging with the regime concept can be a reaction to this situation. This research examines this context. It aims to clarify analytical perspectives in historical migration research and provide an outline of the concept of migration regimes as well as an approach to analyzing the negotiation processes that shape and produce migration.

Keywords

Migration regime, negotiation, migration, historical migration research, migration history

Migration aushandeln. Perspektiven aus der Historischen Migrationsforschung

Zusammenfassung

Die Historische Migrationsforschung hat insbesondere seit den späten 1980er Jahren eine Vielzahl von Migrationsformen, Wandlungsvorgängen und Diskursen über räumliche Bewegungen erschlossen. Ausmachen lässt sich allerdings eine Tendenz, es bei einem Nebeneinanderstellen isolierter Einzelperspektiven zu belassen. Als eine Reaktion darauf kann das Bemühen verstanden werden, neue übergreifende und zusammenführende Perspektiven

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durch die Auseinandersetzung mit dem Konzept der Regime zu bieten. In diesen Kontext siedelt sich der vorliegende Beitrag an. Ihm geht es darum, Beobachtungsperspektiven der Historischen Migrationsforschung zu verdeutlichen und ein Konzept von Migrationsregimen sowie einen Ansatz über die Analyse von Aushandlungsprozessen zu skizzieren, die Migration formen und herstellen.

Schlagwörter

Migrationsregime, Aushandlung, Migration, Historische Migrationsforschung, Migrationsgeschichte

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Especially since the late 1980s, historical migration research has looked into many forms and instances of migration. Since the early 21st century, this line of research has grown at an accelerated rate. The field continues to focus primarily on the 19th and especially the 20th century, but for years research looking into the early modern period (overviews provide: Moch 1992; Bade et al. 2012; Niggemann 2016) and the Middle Ages (Borgolte 2014) has been gaining momentum.¹ This means that the necessary prerequisites exist for developing a perspective on historical forms of migration that spans multiple eras and contributes to understanding and explaining migratory processes and structures in the present.

However, many studies in recent years have viewed the migration phenomena they have examined as more or less solitary events resulting from specific socioeconomic, political or cultural »crises«. We can see a trend in historical work to develop isolated individual perspectives that do not place value on revealing relations, hierarchies and interrelationships, that is, situating the actions of individuals or microstructures into societal contexts and structures on the meso and macro levels. Efforts to offer new perspectives by engaging with the concept of migration regime can be viewed as a reaction to that situation. This contribution is to be understood within this context. It will first provide a brief introduction to perspectives of observation in historical migration research and then outline a concept of migration regimes as

German version: Jochen Oltmer, Migration aushandeln: Perspektiven aus der Historischen Migrationsforschung. In *Was ist ein Migrationsregime? What Is a Migration Regime?*, eds. Andreas Pott, Christoph Rass, and Frank Wolff, 239–254. Wiesbaden: Springer 2018.

¹ On this, see an overview with a global historical perspective in Oltmer (2016b). Also see Cohen (1995), Gungwu (1997), Hoerder (2002), McKeown (2004), Kraler et al. (2007), Ness (2013), Manning (2013), and Fisher (2014).

well as an approach to analyze the negotiation processes that form and produce migration.²

1 Observational Perspectives of Historical Migration Research

Historical migration research investigates spatial movements of people. These movements vary greatly in terms of their size, and studies look into many different social aspects.³ This applies, for example, to the large-scale European emigration abroad in the »long« 19th century, which can and has been studied with the help of process-produced mass data and quantitative methods in terms of its dimensions, forms and structures,⁴ but it also applies to the fluctuating intra- and interregional labor migration between rural and urban areas or between differing types and sizes of cities during the course of industrialization and urbanization (Woude et al. 1990; Hohenberg and Lees 1995; Lenger 2014, chapters II and III; on the German example, see: Lange-wiesche 1977; Hochstadt 1999). It can also be used for asking about the motives and strategies of migration or integration for collectives, families or individuals, as can be observed in the increasing employment of laborers who immigrated from other countries to west, central and north European industrialized states in the late 19th and early 20th centuries and then took on much larger dimensions starting in the 1950s (for a European perspective: Oltmer et al. 2012).

Many different materials can be used to study these kinds of historical processes and structures, and the materials can in turn be examined using various methods: Hermeneutic methods look at the migrants' motives and goals, their knowledge of their actions, their strategies, self-constructions and self-identities based especially on ego documents (such as letters, journals, biographies, newspaper ads) or visual material (especially paintings, drawings, photographs, videos), although the latter type is used to a much lesser extent. Biographical interviews are another option for research related to contemporary history. The majority of migrants (or potential migrants) in past centuries and decades have left behind no ego documents or only traces of them. That is why a large part of the materials which have been investigat-

² In the following, the notes and recommended literature will be kept to a minimum.

³ Terms and approaches can be found in McNeill and Adams (1978) (in particular Tilly 1978), Hoerder and Moch (1996), Yans-McLaughlin (1990), Bade (2004), Hoerder et al. (2012), Hoerder (2005), and Oltmer (2016a).

⁴ Overviews on European migration overseas can be found in Nugent (1995), Moch (1992, pp. 147–160), Baines (1995) and Bade (2003, pp. 81–117).

ed by historical migration research, using content-analytical methods with the goal of learning about migrants' actions, attitudes, experiences, expectations, motives and biographical circumstances, stems from the collections, observations and evaluations of other actors, especially institutional actors. These are often available in writing (for example, minutes from interrogations and court proceedings, passports, naturalization certificates, case files for naturalizations, deportations, entries into the country and residence permits, or official, medical and scientific reports etc.) or, in rarer cases, they are available as oral information (expert or other interviews). Usually, these records come from the discourses and practices of those who ruled and from elites, and they must therefore be considered with specific hermeneutical approaches to be able to draw out the aspirations and interpretations of the world and situation that influenced or shaped migrants' actions.

Historical migration research looks at migration processes that had the aim of permanent residency in a destination area (and thus required particular preparations in the region of origin), but also at the numerous forms of temporary stays—from seasonal or circular movements to multiple-year stays to work far from home or working as a nomadic migrant laborer, a lifestyle that was typically only able to be maintained for a limited period of time. It thereby overcomes a viewpoint that long dominated historical research, namely, that migration is primarily a linear process stretching from the decision to leave the place of origin through the journey to the destination region and lasting until permanent residency was established there (Bade 1988).

The establishment, transformation and destabilization of migration systems (see Lucassen 1987; Kriz et al. 1992) are also objects of modern historical migration research. A migration system is understood to be a relatively stable and long-lasting migration relationship between a region of origin and a destination region. Historical migration research asks why and in what way these interregional and transregional migration relationships, some of which existed over decades or centuries, were established and stabilized—and typically points out economic, political or cultural links and relationships that enabled and structured a close-knit interregional exchange of goods, services, information and people. Studies on migrant networks and the establishment of migration traditions, especially in the context of settlement and labor migration, show the dynamics with which migration transformed the existing relationships of exchange.

In addition, contributions from historical migration research can also offer snapshots of the overall migration situation in a region, and these snapshots can be used to illuminate the interactions among various different forms of migration in a specific social, economic, demographic and political

constellation. To help understand these constellations, we can use published and unpublished documents from official statistics at various levels. However, these pose serious challenges to research in particular regarding the critical assessment of the specific interests and conditions behind the production of such statistics. Large spatial movements of people were usually an object of direct attention for statistics, as these movements were considered to be socially, economically, demographically and politically relevant phenomena and problems. This then resulted in particular logics for categorizations that historical migration researchers often do not question but simply take on as a standard in their own assessments.

Starting in the 17th century, population statistics have been at the heart of the rise of modern official statistics, which were especially important for planning and government activities because they provided a way to gather data to ensure compliance with tax requirements and military drafts. From the very beginning, registering the scope, dynamics, direction and social make-up of migration movements played a key role in this context. This applies to censuses that were at first carried out sporadically, on a case-by-case basis and with little nuance, and then, starting in the 19th century, data on the population were gathered regularly and with a great deal of effort (e.g. Schneider 2013). Data that can be used for historical migration research also include population and civil registers at the national or municipal level as well as information about the number of border crossings and deportations and the number of documents issued (passports, visas). Since the late 19th century, statistics on the labor market have also grown in importance. Process-produced data on many different migration phenomena are available for modern times with varying levels of quality and scope. The range is enormous, as are the challenges involved with critically examining and using the material: The information includes relatively simplistic assessments of the scope of individual movements, but as public administration grew and states began to take intervening measures starting in the (late) 19th century, highly nuanced data were also gathered that enable more detailed quantitative analyses on topics ranging from migrants' participation in the labor market to their social composition, from key demographic data to marriage trends, media consumption and nutritional habits. In terms of methods, descriptive statistical analyses are much more common than analyses that use exploratory statistics.

Historical migration research primarily asks about 1) migration aspirations, that is, the background for the decision to migrate, the development of (gender-specific) migration strategies in the context of individual and collective migration projects under various economic, social, political, ecological, cultural and linguistic conditions; 2) the many different patterns of spatial

movements between regions of origin and destination regions in the context of political, economic and cultural interrelationships between the two regions; 3) the constitution and functions of migrant networks and migrant organizations; 4) migrants' expectations and experiences; 5) the dimensions, forms and consequences of migration in the destination region when that migration is temporary in nature but could also result in permanent settlement and integration in a multi-generational process; 6) migrants' living conditions and biographies; 7) self-constructions, practices and challenges of identity-building in the process of migration and integration; 8) the efforts of authorities, states and non-governmental organizations to influence migration and integration; 9) the production of (academic) knowledge about migration; 10) the emergence of migration as a media event and 11) the effects of emigration on the members of the families and collectives who stayed behind and on the economic, social, political and cultural structures and dynamics in the regions of origin (for Germany, see e.g. Oltmer 2016a).

2 Migration Regimes

Why do I differentiate between migration regimes and negotiations about migration in the following? Why do I take on a perspective that distances itself from using the term »regime« in a way that encompasses all interests and actors involved in the production, observation and structuring of migration (in particular the migrants themselves) as a part of the regime? The term »regime« as it is used in many different disciplines refers to systems of order and regulation. The word »regime« has Latin origins and is related to ruling or regimen; the Latin verb »regere« means to direct, guide or rule. A concept of regime that does not exclusively refer to institutionalized, formalized and relatively stable forms of power relations and domination remains too expansive and vague. However, studies on negotiation processes are able to analyse highly varied social relationships that are directed at acquiring power (at least sporadically) in conflict or cooperation, but these are not always relationships of domination.

Max Weber's definition can be drawn on when discussing the concepts of »power« and »domination«: »Power« (Macht) is the probability that one actor within a social relationship will be in a position to carry out his own will despite resistance, regardless of the basis on which this probability rests« (Weber 1976, p. 53). In this sense, »power« does not have the same meaning as the general usage in reference to an object, or the idea of owning something, of »having power«, but is meant as a relationship. »Power« is a social relationship; it is an asymmetry in social relationships that can take on many different forms, at times being a long-term state, sometimes ad hoc, some-

times comprehensive and sometimes only for particular situations and constellations. »Power« is constantly being re-negotiated.

In contrast, Weber defined dominance as »the probability that a command with a given specific content will be obeyed by a given group of persons« (Weber 1976, p. 53), and he specifies that »every genuine form of domination implies a minimum of voluntary compliance, that is, an interest (based on ulterior motives or genuine acceptance) in obedience« (Weber 1976, p. 212). In this sense, dominance is consolidated, perpetual power that can be understood in particular as an institutionalized and formalized exercise of power that is intended to be permanent on the part of an individual or a collective over another collective. It is based on obedience and legitimacy so that it can be exercised more than just sporadically. Organizations in particular ensure that dominance is a »special case of power« (Weber 1976, p. 941), that the asymmetry can be maintained for a relatively long period of time, and that it is recognized, sustained and visible (Nassehi 2011, p. 254 f.). Regimes are characterized by institutionalized power. They are arenas containing relatively stable apparatuses that produce norms, structures and organizations to influence migration.

Studies in historical migration research have made clear that individual and collective action on the part of (potential) migrants has always been subject to various institutional actors making efforts to control, steer and regulate them. It can therefore be seen that institutional actors limited or expanded the agency of individuals or collectives in improving or opening up new opportunities for themselves in the realm of work, business, settlement, education or training by moving to different geographical and social spaces. The attempts to influence these movements represented a reaction to observed migrant behaviors, to other institutional actors' competing efforts to control, steer and regulate migration and to social, economic and cultural changes induced by migration processes.

What conclusions can be drawn from this when it comes to observing historical migration processes? Migration movements were and continue to be shaped by a web of norms, rules, constructions, knowledge and actions on the part of institutional actors, and the components of this web differ in each individual case. It can be described as a migration regime. The term »regime« is used in a wide range of different contexts. In general, »regime« is used when referring to authoritarian political systems, even in academic contexts, although there is no systematic use of the term. When reflecting on the use of the term »regime« and its foundation as an academic concept, since the 1970s we can see that in research on international relations the term has referred to principles, norms, rules and procedures that order cooperation between participating states in specific fields of policy on a long-term basis (see Krasner

1982; Hasenclever et al. 1997). In migration research, regime concepts have entered the debate via political science studies on the governance or management of migration (among many other works, see, for example, Gosh 2000; Tamas and Palme 2004). One critical view of the (political) ideas on the necessity of far-reaching control and governance of transborder migration took up the term and emphasized that the typical thoughts on the management of migration only see migrants as objects of this categorization, administration and governance (among many other works, see King and Skeldon 2010, p. 1621 f.; Geiger and Pécoud 2013). In contrast, research into border regimes stresses the agency of migrants vis-à-vis state institutions. It has also significantly advanced methods in border studies, but tends—often from an activist position—to demonize state actors and romanticize migrants (among many other works, see: Transit Migration Forschungsgruppe 2007).

Migration regimes are to be understood here as integrated fields of the shaping and activity of institutional actors which focus on a specific aspect of migration processes, channel migration movements and categorize migrants and potential migrants. Each migration regime has its own institutional actors and specific migration objects on which it focuses its attention. It problematizes migration, plans and acts in ways that differ from other migration regimes. It includes specific rules and processes, conditions and forms of collecting information about migration. It evaluates this information differently than other regimes and conveys the results in different ways within and to institutional actors, migrants and potential migrants, and the public (on this and the following with further references, see Oltmer 2009, 2012a, 2012b, 2014).

Institutional actors can be state (legislative, executive, judicial), supra-state and international entities, or they can be municipal apparatuses or private organizations (companies, associations). Their interests, norms, practices and ways of observing situations produce very different categorizations of migrants, and these categories influence the migrants' societal, economic, political or cultural participation at their destination.

Migration regimes continually change—this process can be gradual due to the slow pace of change in political, economic, societal, environmental and mental structures, or rapid as a reaction to events or paradigm changes. They can include spaces of different sizes, they can operate within political territorial borders or extend beyond these borders. Migration regimes differ in the possibilities they have for enforcing measures because they have different access to resources and power. They also acquire, communicate and use their knowledge in different ways to model and predict migration. Each regime therefore produces, categorizes and processes »its« migrations differently. Regimes' differing approaches and practices of institutional actors by no

means have to be harmonized, as regimes and different regime types are intertwined, they overlap, and they maintain conflictual or cooperative relationships.

Migration regimes always comprise two essential fields that are intertwined: The first field constitutes a »mobility regime« that refers to the influence exercised in regard to access to or emigration from a region or territory. The second field is the »presence regime« that includes norms and practices of including or excluding migrants in various societal areas in the region or country of destination such as politics, law, labor market, or education. Hence, presence regimes frame »integration«, which can be understood as the constant negotiation of opportunities for economic, political, religious or legal participation.

Analyzing migration regimes can help evaluate the conditions, forms and consequences of migration by offering answers to the basic question of which institutional actors observe and influence migration for what reasons, in which way and with which consequences. Such an analysis attempts to give shape to the multitude of actors involved and to offer a nuanced picture of these actors and groups while also mapping out their specific constellations. Studying the relationships and thus the hierarchies is proving to be key to this question: Migration regimes create arenas in which institutional actors can engage in conflicts and cooperation, and the actors' agency and interests are continually changing. When considering these arenas, we must remember that while institutional actors are often spoken of in blanket terms (»the state«, »the business sector«, »the administration«, »the municipal government«), each of these is quite heterogeneous. They are each made up of numerous individual and collective actors whose interests, ideas and actions clash and interact with one another.

This type of open concept offers far-reaching perspectives for the macro level, for example for investigating long-lasting migration regimes that span continents or for looking into the interconnections among various regional, transborder and global areas of responsibility (such as in the context of influencing migration movements in the modern empires such as in the Spanish, Portuguese, British and Dutch colonies or the Ottoman and Russian Empires). Not only that, the concept can also be applied to the micro level and can include, for example, an examination of an aspect of the regime's daily operations (such as the attempt to decipher the routines of selecting migrants as part of the daily tasks carried out by the border police, who belong to the mobility regime), or it can be used to investigate the foundations of a regime as a knowledge apparatus (such as looking for medical criteria for recruiting skilled laborers or gathering statistics to identify and influence the composition of migrant populations). Looking into the daily processes and decisions

of how institutions handle migration and the micro-perspectives into knowledge and power apparatuses help us to categorize the potentials and perspectives of institutional influence on migration so that we can better understand the extent of the impact that governance concepts and production of meanings have in modern societies. They enable us to understand the specific paradigms, concepts and categories—which are different for each actor and are constantly changing—that were and continue to be used by the actors to name and describe migration based on their respective interests, to form constructions of reality, and to plan specific actions. Another key area of investigation includes research into the conditions of regime changes as well as the forms such changes take and the consequences they have: These are sequences that are characterized by a new constellation of actors as well as a production of new norms, procedures, organizations, processes and legitimation for (political) actions and decisions; investigating them could also contribute to understanding what is up for discussion and used to be a part of everyday life.

3 Migration as a Negotiation Process

How do migration regimes relate to migrants? For migration regimes, migrants are objects of tasks and the reason for problematizing issues and implementing measures, but migration regimes also compete in conflicts or when recruiting migrants. Migrants or potential migrants react to restrictive interventions (such as prohibitions for emigrating or immigrating), to force (e.g., by flight as refugees) or to attractive offers (such as recruitment by businesses, immigration policies that benefit trades or attracting highly skilled workers). Individually or collectively, migrants can present a challenge to the migration regime. They develop strategies to assert and maintain their own movement in a field characterized by domination practices and ascriptions of identity, and these strategies also enable them to realize their aspirations, express their reasons, and present and modify their life careers.

Migrants act as individuals or in networks or collectives (including their families) and have varying degrees of autonomy based on their differing experiences with societal expectations and preferences, on norms, rules and laws, and on the images they have of themselves and others have of them. As they act, they pursue their own interests and objectives with differing amounts of economic, cultural, social, legal and economic capital at their disposal. They each have a different degree of agency vis-à-vis the migration regime. Migrant infrastructures and interest managers develop self-images that shape processes of migrant community-building through identity politics.

We can observe different ranges of impact and degrees of effectiveness in the interplay between norms, strategies and measures carried out by institutional actors in migration regimes on the one hand, and migrants' or potential migrants' tactics, activities and actions, on the other. In this way, institutional and individual actors influence, form and (co)produce migration through conflict and cooperation. If we take this perspective seriously, then we can successfully reveal relations, hierarchies and interrelationships, that is, we can situate individual cases and the actions of individuals into contexts and structures on the meso and macro levels (Hoerder 2005, pp. 73–84). This can help us achieve our goal of counteracting the described tendency in historical work to produce isolated individual perspectives that do not refer to one another.

Focusing on certain integrated fields of action with actors that each have specific relations and degrees of autonomy reduces migration-related complexity, thus offering an approach that helps understand complexity and therefore also has an epistemological function. Migration regimes and migration-related negotiation processes refer to research objects; they are co-produced by migration researchers' observations and descriptions, including those of researchers who work with historical methods. These researchers know that in the context of producing and negotiating migration, actors carry out daily activities on the basis of unquestioned routines, assuming »that most of their surrounding environment was simply a given« (Pries 2014, p. 109; see also: Welskopp 2014, p. 64). That is, they act based on action dispositions and on standardized, spontaneous interpretations of the situation they formed due to internalized experiences (Kroneberg 2011, pp. 119–164). Historians define the boundaries of the migration regime and the negotiation arena with, against or about migrants, using problem-oriented research questions. These questions determine the ways in which complexity is reduced, processes are explained and thus patterns, models and approaches are developed as well as which tools are used. The research object is the problem-oriented focus on investigating interests, objectives and actions as part of a co-production of migration.

Past migration regimes and the many different negotiation processes that took place on various levels are not merely constructs of historical migration research, however. Rather, they constitute historical structures and allow their focused reconstruction, as these structures have left remains and traces. Information about the actions of individuals, collectives and institutions as well as their motives and practices have been documented in various forms (see above) because it was considered newsworthy by contemporaries and therefore became the subject of knowledge production. Historical migration research can—and must—draw on this knowledge today. The way the mate-

rial was passed down was highly selective, not only because storing it always came with risks, but especially because the material that was saved was primarily that which seemed worth preserving in the context of reproducing structures of domination and power. This means that complexity was reduced in three ways: 1) Contemporary knowledge producers were neither motivated nor able to describe their reality comprehensively. 2) The producers often belonged to higher social classes and, due to their social or professional position (often as »power-holders« and »rulers«), they took on a specific and thus limited view. 3) The material that was passed on was usually that which was relevant for law, politics or business and was considered to be worthy of being passed on from the perspective of the authorities or state institutions.

A historiographical position that is critical of knowledge must react to the conditions, forms and consequences of this reduction of complexity (Herbst 2004). To do so, it is necessary to reconstruct the conditions under which the sources used were created and passed on. In addition, historical sources of different origin and scope must be included as far as possible. This once again points to the benefits of applying approaches that focus on actors and actions. Doing so offers a perspective that attempts to understand the positions and actions of individual actors in the context of negotiating migration to better grasp the forms of specific knowledge production at play. That is important because this knowledge production had fundamental consequences for producing and passing on the materials used as a basis for the investigation into the negotiation of migration in the past.

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Christoph Rass

Setting the Agenda with an *Infinite Text*

Abstract

This contribution examines the significant role of Jochen Oltmer as an agenda-setter in migration studies. It argues that Oltmer's academic work over the last 30 years has shaped scholarly and public discourse in Germany and beyond. The analysis focuses on three key conceptual frameworks that can be traced in Oltmer's distinctive writing mode of an »infinite text«: a) migration as a state-regulated process, b) migration regimes, and c) migration as negotiation. In addition, it assesses their impact through the lens of Andreas Wimmer's model for analyzing influential scholars. The paper highlights Oltmer's commitment to interdisciplinary analysis, historical depth, and contemporary relevance, emphasizing his contribution to understanding migration as a constitutive aspect of human existence.

Keywords

Infinite text, migration regimes, negotiation, agenda-setting in academia

Agenda-Setting mit einem *unendlichen Text*

Zusammenfassung

Dieser Beitrag untersucht die Rolle von Jochen Oltmer als Agenda-Setter in der Migrationsforschung. Er argumentiert, dass Oltmers Werk über die letzten 30 Jahre hinweg die wissenschaftliche Forschung wie auch die öffentliche Debatte über Migration geprägt hat. Die Analyse konzentriert sich auf drei in Oltmers Arbeitsmodus des »unendlichen Texts« aufscheinende konzeptionelle Perspektiven: 1) Migration als staatlich regulierter Prozess, 2) Migrationsregime und 3) Migration als Aushandlung. Ausgehend von Andreas Wimmers Modell des akademischen Agenda-Setters analysiert der Beitrag daran anschließend die Wirkung Oltmers auf die wissenschaftlichen und öffentli-

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chen Debatten um Migration. Dabei stellt er insbesondere Oltmers Engagement für interdisziplinäre Analyse, historische Tiefe und zeitgenössische Relevanz heraus, die seinen Beitrag zum Verständnis von Migration als konstitutivem Aspekt der menschlichen Existenz auszeichnen.

Schlagwörter

Unendlicher Text, Migrationsregime, Aushandlung, wissenschaftliches Agenda-Setting

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Migration studies have evolved significantly through scholars who have introduced innovative conceptual frameworks and methodological approaches. Among these influential figures, Jochen Oltmer stands out as a historian who has not only advanced our understanding of migration processes but has also actively shaped research directions in the field. This paper examines his role as an *agenda-setter* by analyzing how his distinctive approach to migration history has influenced scholarly discourse in Germany and beyond. In earlier conversations with the author, Jochen Oltmer has often described his historical scholarship as working on an »infinite text«, a notion that resonates with Umberto Eco's (1963/1989) philosophy of art as an »opera aperta«. Like a piece of art, the perpetual translation of the past into history invites multiple interpretations and resists finality. This frames historical scholarship as requiring continuous revision as new evidence emerges and new perspectives develop. This philosophical orientation fosters an understanding of migration as a complex phenomenon that demands ongoing scholarly engagement rather than definitive explanation, essentially challenging what Oltmer terms »geschichtsblinde« (historically blind) approaches that treat contemporary migration patterns as unprecedented crises rather than manifestations of historical continuities (Oltmer 2020).

Over three decades since his scholarly debut with »Bäuerliche Ökonomie und Arbeitskräftepolitik im Ersten Weltkrieg« (1995), Oltmer has developed several influential theoretical frameworks that have shaped migration studies in important ways. Three of these are discussed in this paper: (1) migration as a state-regulated process, (2) migration regimes, and (3) migration as negotiations. These interconnected frameworks collectively offer a comprehensive approach to understanding the governance of migration across varying contexts and historical periods, while consistently emphasizing migration as »Normalfall«—a normal, continuous aspect of human existence rather than an aberrant phenomenon requiring exceptional measures (Bade and Oltmer 2004). Rather than establishing rigid paradigms, Oltmer's conceptual frame-

works invite adaptation and extension through scholarly intervention, embodying his commitment to the historiography of migration as an ongoing collaborative enterprise.

This paper examines Jochen Oltmer's contribution to migration studies by applying Andreas Wimmer's (2025) model for analyzing academic *agenda-setters*. Wimmer identified five key dimensions that characterize influential scholarly work: the capacity to analyze cultural complexity, the ability to embed phenomena within broader historical and social contexts, the adoption of a global perspective, the diagnosis of intellectual trends, and the synthesis of diverse strands of research into coherent analytical frameworks. Following this approach, this essay first traces the trajectory of Oltmer's intellectual development. It then explores three central conceptual frameworks that structure his work. Finally, it assesses how Oltmer's scholarship has shaped the field of migration studies, and outlines its significance for future research.

1 Formative Years: Becoming a Migration Scholar

Oltmer's contributions to migration studies are rooted in both his academic journey and personal origins, reflecting a biographical sensitivity to migration processes that would profoundly shape his scholarly approach. Born in 1965 in Wittmund, East Frisia, Germany, a transnational border region characterized by patterns of emigration and proximity to the Netherlands, he developed an early awareness of migration as integral to regional identity rather than as an external disruption. His education at Osnabrück University, where he worked extensively with pioneering migration scholar Klaus J. Bade, established an intellectual foundation for his emergence as a leading migration historian dedicated to interdisciplinary analysis, historical depth, and contemporary relevance.

His doctoral research on wartime agricultural labor migration (Oltmer 1995) demonstrated an early interest in the relationships between state policies, economic necessities, and migration processes, particularly the friction between economic pragmatism and nationalist anxieties that would become central to his later work. His 2001 *Habilitation*, published as »Migration und Politik in der Weimarer Republik« (Oltmer 2005), cemented his expertise in German migration history while revealing patterns of state fragmentation and policy contradiction that would inform his subsequent theorization of migration regimes.

Institution-building marks another defining aspect of Oltmer's career that extends far beyond individual scholarship. From his early years as a doctoral researcher under Klaus J. Bade's mentorship, Oltmer contributed to

establishing the Institute for Migration Research and Intercultural Studies (IMIS) at Osnabrück University in 1991. His commitment to the institution deepened when he assumed the role of managing director in 1995, helping transform IMIS into one of Europe's leading centers for migration research and creating an institutional platform for interdisciplinary collaboration that would shape the field for decades to come. His involvement in countless projects, research networks, expert councils, and other leadership roles in organizations and institutions were dedicated to migration research in Germany and abroad. This extended his influence beyond individual research to shaping broader disciplinary conversations about methodological approaches and research priorities. Oltmer's prolific scholarship encompasses several hundred books and articles, including foundational works such as »Migration und Politik in der Weimarer Republik« (2005), »Migration vom 19. bis zum 21. Jahrhundert« (Oltmer 2016a), and »Globale Migration: Geschichte und Gegenwart« (Oltmer 2016c), each contributing to his sustained effort to establish a historical perspective as essential for understanding contemporary migration challenges.

The evolution of Oltmer's research reveals a significant intellectual trajectory, moving from structural analysis to a dynamic understanding of migration as a negotiated process. While his early work focused primarily on state policies and their effects, his later publications developed an increasingly nuanced understanding of migration outcomes as emerging from complex interactions among multiple actors with varying degrees of agency and constraint. This shift becomes particularly evident, for example, in »Handbuch Staat und Migration in Deutschland seit dem 17. Jahrhundert« (Oltmer 2015), where he argued that »interests, goals and actions as co-production of migration constitute the research object" (Oltmer 2015, p. 25), marking a departure from purely state-centric approaches toward recognition of the inherently entangled and contested nature of migration.

2 Key Themes of an Interconnected Framework

Oltmer consistently employs historical and comparative methodologies that situate contemporary migration patterns within long-term historical trajectories, revealing both continuities and transformations across diverse temporal and geographical contexts. This approach systematically challenges both presentist assumptions and the nation-state logic that have traditionally constrained migration studies while providing crucial historical context for understanding contemporary developments as part of ongoing historical processes rather than unprecedented phenomena.

2.1 State-Regulated Migration

Oltmer's analysis of state-regulated migration examines how states develop and implement migration policies across historical periods, focusing particularly on German contexts, while incorporating comparative perspectives that reveal recurring patterns of state ambivalence toward migration. This strand of his work has substantially enhanced our understanding of the complex, often contradictory nature of state approaches to migration, while challenging reductive views of state control as either uniformly restrictive or effectively implemented. Oltmer's conceptual innovation lies in his nuanced understanding of state action, which rejects monolithic characterizations in favor of disaggregated analysis, revealing the diverse and sometimes conflicting interests and agencies involved in the regulation of migration (Oltmer 2015).

This refined understanding emerges clearly in his analysis of Weimar Republic migration policies (Oltmer 2005), which demonstrates how different ministries, regional governments, and local authorities developed distinct regulatory approaches that often worked at cross-purposes, reflecting broader tensions between economic necessities and nationalist concerns. Responding to unemployment anxieties, the Secretary of Labor frequently advocated restrictive policies toward foreign workers. At the same time, the Department of Agriculture, confronting acute rural labor shortages, supported more permissive approaches, creating bureaucratic conflicts that undermined policy coherence.

Another distinctive feature of Oltmer's scholarship is his persistent emphasis on the gap between formal policies and their practical implementation. In numerous publications he examines how migration policies are transformed through administrative processes characterized by significant discretion and variation (Oltmer 2018b). His study of migration within the context of Nazi Germany exemplifies this approach, showing how racial ideologies shaped migration policies, while implementation varied considerably, as local officials exercised discretion and economic considerations, sometimes trumping ideological imperatives (Oltmer 2012b). Oltmer consistently situates migration policies within broader historical processes, demonstrating how they both reflect and contribute to larger transformations in state formation, economic development, and social organization (Oltmer 2018a). His analysis of guest worker programs (Oltmer 2012a), for example, places these initiatives within the broader processes of economic reconstruction, Cold War politics, and European integration (Bade et al. 2012), revealing how migration policies serve multiple functions beyond their ostensible purposes while generating unintended consequences that reshape relations between state and society.

2.2 Migration Regimes

The concept of »migration regimes« constitutes a particularly significant theoretical contribution that Oltmer made to migration research. Building systematically on his earlier work, and in dedicated dialogue with colleagues from diverse disciplines and fields, he proposed an analytical framework that significantly influenced how scholars from different disciplines within migration studies conceptualize the governance of migration across different historical periods and geographical contexts. Oltmer defines migration regimes as »complex systems of rules, norms, practices, and institutions that shape migration processes« (Oltmer 2015, p. 20), encompassing formal policies and laws, informal practices, institutional arrangements, and cultural understandings that collectively structure the governance of migration.

This theoretical foundation draws eclectically from institutional analysis in political science, historical institutionalism, and sociological approaches, creating a synthetic framework that captures the complexity of migration governance while remaining historically grounded. One key innovation in Oltmer's conceptualization is his emphasis on the multilevel nature of migration governance, considering migration regimes as frameworks that operate simultaneously across local, national, imperial, supranational, and global dimensions (Oltmer 2018c). This scalar approach reveals how different levels of governance interact, sometimes reinforcing, sometimes undermining each other's efforts, while creating opportunities for migrants and other actors to navigate between different regulatory frameworks. Central to Oltmer's regime analysis is the recognition of the multitude of actors involved in the governance of migration beyond traditional state institutions, including international organizations, civil society groups, employers, and migrants themselves, each contributing to ongoing processes of regime formation and transformation (Oltmer 2019a). Thus, historical contingency and variability represent central themes in Oltmer's analysis, as he consistently demonstrates how regimes vary across historical periods and geographical contexts, rather than following universal patterns (Oltmer 2016a).

Comparative and transnational perspectives characterize Oltmer's approach to migration regimes. He examines regimes across different countries while considering how they are shaped by transnational connections and global processes (Oltmer 2016b). This perspective reveals how seemingly national policies are actually embedded in broader international frameworks while highlighting persistent differences in national approaches that reflect distinct historical experiences and political cultures.

2.3 Negotiating Migration

The concept of »negotiating migration« constitutes Oltmer's most mature and sophisticated theoretical contribution to the field. Again, Oltmer built on his earlier work on state-regulated migration and migration regimes to develop a sophisticated understanding of migration as an inherently negotiated process involving multiple actors with varying interests, power resources, and strategic capacities. He defines negotiating migration as a complex process through which outcomes are shaped by interactions between migrants, states, and other actors (Oltmer 2021), emphasizing the interactive and dynamic nature of migration processes while recognizing the agency of various actors within structural constraints.

In »Das Aushandeln von Migration« (Oltmer 2016b), Oltmer establishes a broader understanding by arguing that social discourse about migration—how migration is discussed, categorized, and represented in society—constitutes an essential form of negotiation with material consequences for migrants and policy development. This perspective expands the concept beyond direct interactions to include discursive practices that shape migration frameworks, recognizing how language and representation actively construct migration realities, rather than simply describing them. Oltmer engages with diverse scholarly traditions for his theoretical foundations, creating a synthetic approach that captures the complexity of migration as a social phenomenon while remaining historically grounded. From political sociology, Oltmer understands power as relational and distributed across various actors and channels rather than concentrated solely in state institutions, revealing how power can be exercised by various actors, including migrants themselves. From anthropology, he incorporates insights into migrant agency and the everyday practices through which migrants navigate, adapt to, and sometimes transform regulatory systems.

A key aspect of Oltmer's negotiation concept is his emphasis on migrant agency within migration processes, ultimately rejecting approaches that treat migrants as passive objects of state policies or structural forces in favor of recognizing them as active agents who develop strategic approaches for navigating, circumventing, or reshaping regulatory frameworks (Oltmer 2019b). In his edited volume »Migrationsregime vor Ort und lokales Aushandeln von Migration«, which develops analytical approaches to »levels of investigation of migration and settlement processes below the nation-state« (Oltmer 2018c, p. 1), Oltmer particularly focuses on the crucial importance of local contexts in the negotiation of migration. Similarly, the spatial dimensions of negotiation feature prominently in his analysis, as he demonstrates how migration is negotiated across different spaces—from border zones to urban neighborhoods to transnational social fields—with each context creating

specific conditions and possibilities that may differ substantially from national policy frameworks. Oltmer conceptualizes the relationship between migrant agency and structural constraints as mutually constitutive rather than simply oppositional, acknowledging that migrants exercise agency within structural constraints, while also recognizing that their actions can reshape these constraints over time through the cumulative effects of individual and collective strategies.

3 Oltmer as *Agenda-Setter* in Migration Studies

Evaluating Oltmer's comprehensive contribution through the lens of Wimmer's (2025) analytical framework reveals his profound impact as an *agenda-setter* who has reshaped how scholars approach migration studies through conceptual innovation, methodological rigor, and sustained theoretical development. Oltmer exemplifies conceptual innovation through his frameworks for understanding state-regulated migration, migration regimes, and negotiating migration. Collectively, these provide analytical tools that have moved the field beyond state-centric models toward more comprehensive frameworks capable of capturing complexity across multiple levels, temporal periods, and social actors.

His intellectual evolution from an early focus on migration policy to an increasingly nuanced understanding of migration as negotiation demonstrates a remarkable capacity to refine analytical approaches in response to theoretical developments and empirical insights, reflecting a scholarly maturity that combines theoretical depth with empirical grounding. This trajectory shows exceptional attentiveness to emerging trends in migration patterns and governance structures, as his early recognition of multilevel governance anticipated the growing importance of local and supranational actors in migration governance, while his emphasis on migrant agency aligned with broader shifts toward more actor-centered approaches in the social sciences.

His work both reflects and actively influences broader paradigmatic shifts in migration studies, as his emphasis on migrant agency within structural constraints mirrors broader movements in the social sciences away from structural determinism toward more balanced approaches that recognize both constraints and possibilities for human action. The contextual grounding of Oltmer's work appears throughout his rigorous historical analyses of specific migration regimes and processes, showing how theoretical insights emerge from careful empirical investigation, while generating a broader understanding that transcends particular contexts.

Beyond his extensive academic contributions, Oltmer has established himself as a prominent public intellectual who actively bridges scholarly

research and public discourse on migration. As chief editor of *focus Migration* for the Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung, he has shaped public understanding of migration issues through accessible yet rigorous analysis. His media presence spans major German outlets including *Der Spiegel*, *Die ZEIT*, *Deutschlandfunk*, and *Tagesschau*, where he regularly provides historical context for contemporary migration debates, consistently emphasizing that »Migration ist ein Normalfall seit Beginn der menschlichen Existenz« (Migration has been a normal phenomenon since the beginning of human existence) rather than an exceptional crisis (Oltmer 2022). This commitment to public engagement reflects his broader philosophical approach to migration scholarship as an ongoing dialogue between research and society, contributing to more evidence-based public discourse on migration issues.

Finally, Oltmer's exceptional synthetic capacity integrates insights from multiple disciplines—history, political science, sociology, and anthropology—into coherent frameworks that capture the multifaceted nature of migration, while remaining accessible to scholars across disciplinary boundaries. This interdisciplinary approach acknowledges that no single discipline can fully capture the complexity of migration, while creating possibilities for collaborative research that draws on diverse methodological and theoretical traditions.

Oltmer has influenced migration studies across several key areas, challenging methodological nationalism through the adoption of comparative and transnational perspectives that contribute to broader efforts to move beyond nation-states as natural units of analysis. His approach has demonstrated the deeper roots of contemporary patterns in the regulation of migration, challenging ahistorical tendencies that treat current policies as unprecedented phenomena while revealing recurring tensions and contradictions that persist across different political systems and historical periods. His emphasis on gaps between formal policies and practices of implementation has encouraged scholars to examine the practical operation of migration control systems beyond official policy statements, revealing how abstract policies are transformed through administrative processes that create opportunities for local adaptation and resistance. Oltmer's work has significantly influenced research on migrant strategies and experiences within regulatory frameworks through his recognition of migrants as active agents who navigate, challenge, and sometimes transform migration policies.

4 Conclusion

For more than thirty years, the idea of writing an »infinite text« has shaped Oltmer's approach to *agenda-setting* in migration studies. This reflects his philosophical commitment to scholarship as an ongoing collaborative enterprise rather than the production of definitive knowledge. Rather than establishing fixed paradigms that constrain future research, he has created conceptual frameworks that explicitly invite adaptation, critique, and evolution, embodying his understanding of knowledge production as a dynamic process that requires continuous revision and reinterpretation.

Oltmer's interdisciplinary approach acknowledges that no single discipline can fully capture the complexity of migration, while creating possibilities for synthetic understanding that draws on diverse methodological and theoretical traditions. This intellectual openness enhances his synthetic capacity, enabling the integration of insights from history, political science, sociology, and anthropology into coherent frameworks that capture migration's multifaceted nature, while preserving space for contributions from other disciplines and theoretical perspectives.

His approach to historical research and contemporary issues maintains a rigorous commitment to historical specificity while recognizing the value of historical insights for understanding present circumstances and anticipating future challenges. His work connects past and present not to suggest simplistic continuities or path dependencies but to provide contextual depth and analytical perspective that challenge reductive narratives about migration while revealing persistent patterns and recurring tensions that transcend particular historical moments.

The contextual emphasis throughout Oltmer's work—understanding migration in specific historical, geographical, and social settings—recognizes the inherent limits of universal models while demonstrating how careful attention to context can reveal broader patterns and recurring dynamics that inform both theoretical development and policy formation. As migration continues to transform societies worldwide, Oltmer's approach offers a valuable model of scholarship that maintains intellectual rigor while acknowledging the provisional nature of knowledge and the ongoing need for theoretical refinement and empirical investigation.

His legacy extends beyond specific theoretical insights to demonstrate that influential scholarship often operates like Eco's »*opera aperta*«—inviting participation rather than demanding adherence, provoking questions rather than providing definitive answers, and remaining open to continuous revision and reinterpretation that enriches understanding while acknowledging complexity. In this sense, Oltmer's contribution to migration studies exempli-

fies how academic *agenda-setting* can transcend traditional paradigmatic boundaries to create enduring frameworks for understanding one of the most significant social phenomena of our time, while maintaining a commitment to the ongoing collaborative enterprise of knowledge production that characterizes scholarly communities at their best.

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Boris Nieswand

Understanding Mobilities: Some Theoretical Reflections on Jochen Oltmer's Concept of »Negotiating Migration«

Abstract

This article contextualizes Oltmer's concepts of »negotiation of migration« and »migration regime« in social science theoretical debates. It shows the extent to which Oltmer's understanding of »regime«, »agency«, and »power«, borrowed from political science, can be integrated into theoretical debates and where it opens up new perspectives, particularly in the analysis of the complexity of migration. It further argues for placing greater emphasis on the interrelationships between migrants and regimes, and for adopting a pluralistic approach to theory. This would enable different theoretical repertoires to coexist as viable ways of interpreting social reality.

Keywords

Migration studies, negotiation of migration, migration regimes, structure and agency

Mobilitäten verstehen: Theoretische Überlegungen zu Jochen Oltmers Konzept des »Aushandelns von Migration«

Zusammenfassung

Der Beitrag nimmt eine Einordnung von Oltmers Konzepten der »Aushandlung von Migration« und des »Migrationsregimes« in sozialwissenschaftliche theoretische Debatten vor. Dabei zeigt er, inwiefern sich Oltmers aus der Politikwissenschaft entliehenes Verständnis von »Regime«, »Agency«, »Macht« in bestehende theoretische Debatten einordnen lässt und wo es neue Perspektiven eröffnet: insbesondere bei der Analyse und dem Verständnis

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der Komplexität von Migration. Zugleich plädiert der Artikel dafür, den Wechselbeziehungen zwischen Migrant:innen und Regimen mehr Gewicht zu verleihen und einen pluralistischen Ansatz zu verfolgen. Dieser Ansatz würde die Koexistenz verschiedener theoretischer Repertoires als jeweils zu plausibilisierende Optionen der Deutung von Migrationsverhältnissen zulassen.

Schlagwörter

Migrationsforschung, Aushandlung von Migration, Migrationsregime, Struktur und Handlungsmacht

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The institutionalization of migration studies in Germany since the 1990s has been closely connected to the IMIS in Osnabrück, and to Jochen Oltmer in particular. As an author, lecturer, researcher and manager, Oltmer is one of the field's key figures. To mark his 60th birthday, this contribution explores his work, particularly his concept of the »negotiation of migration«.

From Jochen Oltmer's perspective, the concept of »negotiating migration« is closely tied to a specific notion of structure; namely, the concept of »regime«, which he borrows from political science approaches in international relations (Hasenclever et al. 1997). This resonates with critical border regime studies (Hess and Tsianos 2010; de Genova 2010) and reflexive migration studies (Nieswand and Drotbohm 2014; Dahinden et al. 2021; Stielike et al. 2025), both of which partly shift the focus of migration research away from migrants and their life trajectories toward social fields and apparatuses in which and through which »migration« as an epistemic object and »migrant« as a person-related status come into being.

However, Jochen Oltmer distinguishes his own understanding of regime from the usage found in these fields. He argues: »A concept of regime that does not exclusively refer to institutionalized, formalized, and relatively stable forms of power relations and domination remains too broad and too vague« (Oltmer 2018, pp. 244f.). This narrowing of the regime concept becomes possible by pairing it with the counter-concept of »negotiation«. Here we find an implicit reference to Anselm Strauss' notion of »negotiated order« (Strauss 1978) that was developed as a micro-sociological alternative to macro-sociological and psychological approaches to social order (Day and Day 1977). In the tradition of symbolic interactionism and the Chicago School, the theoretical accent is put on situated interactions as the theoretically identified location where the contingencies and possibilities opened by social structures are interpreted and transformed into specific practical solutions. The meta-

phor of »negotiated order« is influenced by economic sociology, where prices are seen as co-produced by interactive processes involving various actors, each with different resources. It stresses the navigational and improvisational skills of actors to find collaborative solutions with others even under complicated structural circumstances.

Nevertheless, unlike more radical micro-sociological approaches that advocate a flat ontology¹ (Schatzki 2016), Jochen Oltmer does not give up on the idea of structure as a semi-autonomous layer of reality that exists beyond and outside situated doings and sayings. His understanding of the structure-agency problem is close to that of Margaret Archer (1996), who offers an alternative to Anthony Giddens' influential theory of structuration. Giddens (1984, pp. 25–28) views the relationship between structure and agency as a continuous cycle: Structures are the sedimented outcomes of past actions that, in turn, condition new actions, thereby reproducing or transforming pre-existing structures. For Giddens structures and actions can be analytically distinguished at a given point in time but are generally made of the same social »substance«. Archer (1996, pp. 85–94), however, argues that the link between structure and agency should be understood more loosely. She contends that the functionality and stability of systems—such as language and its grammar—often does not depend significantly on individual actions. Therefore, structures are better conceptualized as a distinct domain of reality, rather than being conflated with the actions of individuals operating within them. This does not mean structures do not change (Oltmer 2016, pp. 334), but that actions aiming to transform systems are often differently situated and address structures in different ways compared to actions that operate within a given structure or regime. Applied to migration, it means, for example, that government policies or constitutional court rulings likely exert greater influence on migration regimes than do the actions of migrants seeking to mitigate risk under specific circumstances.

Following this pathway, Jochen Oltmer conceptualizes regimes and negotiations as two relatively distinct aspects of social reality, which should not be conflated too quickly in order to preserve their respective explanatory value. It resonates with his understanding of history as an academic discipline uniquely equipped to analyze the meaning of large temporal arcs and slowly changing deep structures of society. Historians miss this aim, according to Oltmer, when they lack the ability to grasp relatively stable, wide-

1 A flat ontology is a theoretical construct that assumes there is no distinction between different scales or layers of the social—such as micro and macro levels, interactions, organizations, systems, or practice and structure. Instead, it posits that all social entities are produced and reproduced solely at the »ground level« of doings, sayings, and objects.

reaching structures and instead present »isolated individual perspectives that do not refer to one another« (Oltmer 2018, p. 250).

Thus far, I have treated the concepts of structure and regime synonymously. But why did Jochen Oltmer chose the term regime instead of structure? I think that it echoes his understanding of migration as a field that is constituted by state regulations and authority. Following Max Weber, Oltmer understands authority as »institutionalized and formalized exercise of power that is intended to be permanent on the part of an individual or a collective over another collective« (Oltmer 2018, p. 245). Regimes, in this sense, are relatively stable structures of authority, governance, and power that constitute the framework in which migration occurs (Oltmer 2016, p. 347). »Negotiation« by contrast, encompasses pragmatic and cooperative properties of actors and interactions, and is influenced but not determined by these regimes.

By distinguishing the sphere of negotiation from the structures of authority/regimes, Oltmer gains the analytical freedom not to interpret every asymmetry within interactions as an exercise of domination or resistance. This, in turn, leads him to critique a trend within migration studies that, in his view, »tends—often from an activist position—to demonize state actors and romanticize migrants« (Oltmer 2018, p. 246). It becomes clear: Oltmer's stance is not critical in the conventional sense but analytical. That is, regimes and negotiations should be understood with intellectual distance and low normative judgment. In this way, Oltmer distinguishes his own approach from critical border regime studies, where migrants are often seen as an unruly class of actors who are conceived as a constitutive part of the migration regime. Rooted in Marxist social theory, this perspective tends to understand social order as being constituted by antagonistic group conflicts of oppressors against the oppressed. Oltmer does not follow this theoretical pathway.

If the purpose of theory is to provide, develop, and systematize options for thinking about empirical phenomena, Oltmer's idea of migration as negotiated order can be seen as such a theoretical option. It allows for reflection about entangled temporalities as a relationship between larger historical dis/continuities (regimes) and situational variations (negotiations). It locates migration between the poles of oblivion to power and total domination. It offers an analytical framework to grasp the historical complexity of migration phenomena in terms of specificity and typicality, stability and fluidity, domination and freedom. It holds in check identificatory attachments, whether with migrants or state institutions, for the sake of an independent scholarly assessment.

While I agree with Jochen Oltmer in several of these respects, there is one noteworthy difference regarding how the relationship between migrants and

regimes should be conceptualized. While Oltmer emphasizes the difference between regimes as an institutional framework of governance and migrants who act within these frameworks, I accentuate the entanglements, opacity and ambivalences that blur this distinction (Nieswand 2018). These ambivalences often make it difficult to determine what is structure and what is agency, where to look for causes and effects, and how to draw boundaries between the regime and actors, like migrants, street level administrators, or activists. Consequently, I advocate a concept of regime that privileges the ambivalences of the »in-between« as a theoretical starting point for the analysis of migration processes. Purifying reality and translating it into a world of clear distinctions, such as structure and agency, regimes and migrants, appears to be necessary to actors, because the regime includes so much conflation, hybridity, contradictoriness, and blurriness. A sociological analysis should not imitate these actors' move towards disambiguation, but start from the ambiguities of the in-between and approach purification practices as an object of study. Jochen Oltmer would probably not dispute that ambiguities exist. Nevertheless, he would object that my understanding of the regime »throws the baby out with the bathwater« and expands the concept to a size that seems to cover everything but loses any specific epistemic object.

What are we to make of this dissent? From a reflexive standpoint, I would take a step back and avoid rushing to judge these approaches as right or wrong. It seems more productive to view them as different analytical options that can be used to sharpen the analyses of different empirical cases. In this sense, migration research can gain more if the options are considered each as suitable for analyzing different groups of cases. Of course, there may still be an overlap where the selection of the analytical repertoire remains controversial. In this case, however, it seems more helpful to look for strong, empirically based arguments as to why one theoretical imaginary should be favored over another, rather than attempting to resolve this question theoretically once and for all.

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Transformation in Postmigrant Societies: Contextualizing Jochen Oltmer's Concept of Negotiation

Abstract

Drawing on diverse theoretical and perspectival approaches, such as »super-diversity«, »transnationality«, and »autonomy of migration«, this article situates Oltmer's concept of »negotiation« in current debates in migration research and examines how it can be linked to the perspective of the »post-migrant«. While the latter assumes that the distinction between migrants and non-migrants is becoming increasingly irrelevant for a productive analysis of social contexts, this remains valid for the present time with regard to negotiations. Simultaneously, the focus on negotiations enables analytical clarity and historical depth, which contribute to an understanding of the change in the social concepts of belonging.

Keywords

Migration studies, negotiation, post-migrant paradigm, migration regimes

Transformation in postmigrantischen Gesellschaften: Zur Einordnung von Jochen Oltmers Konzept der Aushandlung

Zusammenfassung

Ausgehend von einer Vielzahl theoretischer und perspektivischer Zugänge der Migrationsforschung wie »Superdiversität«, »Transnationalität« oder »Autonomie der Migration« verortet der Beitrag Oltmers Konzept der »Aushandlung« in aktuellen Debatten der Migrationsforschung und fragt, inwie-

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fern er mit der Perspektive des »Postmigrantischen« in Verbindung zu bringen ist. Während Letztere davon ausgeht, dass die Unterscheidung von Migrant:innen und Nicht-Migrant:innen für eine produktive Analyse sozialer Zusammenhänge zunehmend bedeutungslos wird, bleibt die Zuschreibung im Blick auf Aushandlungen zunächst bestehen. Zugleich ermöglicht der Fokus auf die Aushandlungen analytische Klarheit und historische Tiefe, die zum Verständnis des Wandels gesellschaftlicher Vorstellungen von Zugehörigkeit beitragen.

Schlagwörter

Migrationsforschung, Aushandlung, Postmigrantisches Paradigma, Migrationsregime

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In recent decades, a range of theoretical approaches has emerged to capture the complex transformations driven by migration. These include perspectives on superdiversity (Vertovec 2007), transnationalism (Faist 2000), the migration-development nexus (Nyberg-Sørensen et al. 2002), open or contested borders (Bauder 2013), multiculturalism (Modood 2007), conviviality (Nowicka and Vertovec 2014), autonomy of migration (Mezzadra 2011), and competitive narratives (Triandaphyllidou 2001). Across these frameworks, it is widely acknowledged that migration reshapes not only the lives of immigrants but also the institutions, identities, and imaginaries of host societies. These processes are frequently accompanied by contestation and ambivalence, reflecting deeply political struggles over participation, legitimacy, and access to rights.

We have to read and understand the work of Jochen Oltmer within this broader theoretical landscape, where he describes the transformation through migration as a mode of negotiation, or *Aushandlung*. Rather than treating migration as a unidirectional movement driven by push-pull factors, Oltmer reframes it as a historically embedded process of negotiation among multiple actors. His notion of *Aushandlung* illuminates how migration is continuously shaped through dynamic interactions involving state institutions, migrants, civil society, and economic interests (Oltmer 2018). This framing places Oltmer's work in dialogue with, and as a complement to, the post-migrant paradigm that emphasizes negotiation as a constitutive force in democratic transformation within societies (Foroutan 2019).

Yet, reflecting upon the differences between these perspectives, it becomes evident that Oltmer's conception of *Aushandlung* primarily emphasizes interactions occurring between migration regimes on the one side and

migrants on the other, highlighting structural dynamics alongside individual agency. In contrast, the postmigrant paradigm moves beyond distinguishing between migrants and non-migrants who negotiate their belonging, instead differentiating between pro-pluralistic and anti-pluralistic positions—stances that can be adopted by both immigrants and non-immigrants alike. This shifts the analytical focus away from distinct cultural heritages and toward the shared objectives that might be pursued through strategic alliances, thereby transforming the very notion of negotiation itself.

Originally coined within the cultural sector, the term *postmigrantisch* has gained traction in the social sciences to denote the enduring societal impact of both past and present immigration. Numerically this is evidenced by the fact that as of 2023, nearly 30 percent of the German population had a migration background—among children under five, the figure reached 43 percent. Immigrants and their descendants include neighbors, classmates, colleagues, friends, and life partners. Together with those without recent migration experience, they form complex postmigrant constellations. This reality requires a shift in perspective: migration is no longer understood as a temporary phase; rather it is a foundational element of societal structure.

Postmigrant societies are characterized by the institutional and political recognition of migration as a constitutive element of the social order, a macro-norm embedded within plural democracies (Fraser 2008; Modood 2007; Chakrabarty 2007; Taylor 1992). Yet this recognition has not gone unchallenged; it unfolds through continual processes of *Aushandlung*, and Germany exemplifies this. Following the first 1955 labor recruitment agreement, the years until the 1980s were shaped by the assumption that migrants would return to their countries of origin. The subsequent 25 years were marked by political resistance to the idea of Germany being a country of immigration. It was only in the early 2000s, particularly after the 2006 Integration Summit and under the leadership of Chancellor Angela Merkel, that Germany began to formally design a coordinated integration policy. This shaped a dynamic phase in which German society began to actively negotiate and partially recognize its migration reality while trying to formulate a kind of »New German We« as a national and collective identity. The political acknowledgment of Germany as a country of immigration in 2001 constitutes a critical moment of institutional negotiation, perceived by many immigrants and their descendants as a new social contract—a legitimizing moment for demands around equality and participation. This acknowledgment exposed and challenged structural inequalities, intensifying societal tensions and political polarization. These productive negotiations emerged mainly after a setback in 2010 when Thilo Sarrazin tried to abolish the idea of Germany having become a country of immigration. Negotiating migration is not a

linear process of constant achievements but it comes with disputes, regressions, and ambivalences.

Against this backdrop, Oltmer's work offers both analytical clarity and historical depth. His studies of migration regimes reveal that migration has never been a linear process of arrival and assimilation into a passive host society. Instead, migration has been shaped by the continuous renegotiation of migration-related categories, meanings, and conditions. Migration has been influenced by determining who is considered a migrant, under what conditions people marked as migrants may reside, and how categories such as »refugee«, »guest worker«, or »person with a migration background« are defined. Such definitions are not fixed; they emerge from historically contingent processes of *Aushandlung* involving various stakeholders, such as governments, local authorities, employers, civil society actors, and migrants themselves (Oltmer 2018).

One of Oltmer's contributions is his theorization of the »migration regime«: a relatively stable but evolving configuration of norms, institutions, and practices through which migration is produced and formed (Oltmer 2018). Crucially, these regimes are not static structures; they are the outcome of ongoing negotiations between actors with diverging interests. For example, during the guest worker programs of the 1950s to 1970s, bilateral state agreements, employer demands, and migrant strategies intersected in a regime that was constantly being adjusted. As Oltmer notes, even the state should not be seen as a monolithic actor but as a complex ensemble of agents and agencies often pursuing competing agendas.

Concrete examples of such negotiations abound. Consider the long and contentious process surrounding dual citizenship in Germany. From heated political debates in the late 1990s—where entire election campaigns were fought against dual nationality—to the eventual legal recognition in 2014 (BPA 2014), these processes involved political institutions, legal frameworks, and civil society actors negotiating the boundaries of national belonging. Even after legal recognition, negotiations continued. Questions of double voting rights, inheritance laws, military obligations, and cultural legitimacy, such as public acceptance of headscarves or circumcision, remained deeply contested.

This conceptualization of migration as a co-produced and historically contingent process resonates with the epistemology of postmigration. Post-migrant theory introduces a threefold analytical framework: (1) a descriptive reading of structural shifts after migration (after), (2) a deconstructive reading of anti-immigrant discourse to expose power asymmetries (behind), and (3) a normative reframing of societal belonging beyond ethnonational binaries (beyond). Each of these »post-lenses« reflects the analytical perspective

of *Aushandlung*. They trace how societies narrate, contest, and renegotiate their self-understanding in response to migration.

At the heart of the postmigrant paradigm is a commitment to democratic renewal. It emphasizes the promise of equality not based on ethnonational origin but on shared democratic rights (Nassehi 2018; Fraser 2008). The ongoing adjustment of the boundaries of belonging takes place through contested processes of acknowledgment, driven by opposing forces: those advocating for expanded recognition, and those resisting it. This dynamic generates shifting alliances and hardened antagonisms, leading to what Bauman (2016) and Mouffe (2000) describe as deep societal ambivalence. As both Oltmer (2018) and Pott (2018) observe, these negotiations are intrinsic to how democratic societies manage pluralism.

In postmigrant societies, conflict lines continue to revolve around access to economic resources, but are increasingly accompanied by identity-based struggles, such as gender equality and the rejection of racism and discrimination in their cultural, religious, national, and class-based forms. The demand for recognition implicitly includes expectations of equal opportunities and participation. When these demands are unmet, systemic transformations and political resistance follow. As Bade (2017) noted, marginalized groups invoke the promise of plural democracy to claim measurable participation in education, labor, justice, and political life.

Recognition deficits thus become the starting point of negotiation processes. One clear example is the Antidiscrimination Agency of the Federal Government in Germany (ADS), whose creation led to the 2006 General Equal Treatment Act (AGG). This legal shift was accompanied by broader cultural negotiations around language, canons, and symbols, many of which sparked controversy as they challenged long-standing social norms.

The dynamics of *Aushandlung* extend deeply into symbolic and affective dimensions. Do people with a German passport who wear a headscarf belong to the national cultural tradition? Is circumcision part of the »German culture«? Is it appropriate to call the children of immigrants »foreign children« if they hold German citizenship? These questions demonstrate that laws do not automatically produce social acceptance. Norms must be renegotiated across societal fields—education, media, politics—through democratic conflict and deliberation. The conflict dynamic in postmigrant societies, therefore, centers on the redistribution of both material and symbolic goods. Minority actors, now acknowledged as legitimate participants in public discourse, challenge established privileges and demand recognition and equal rights. Yet this struggle typically remains open-ended and contested, as social hierarchies are rarely relinquished without resistance. As Spivak (1988)

reminds us, marginalized groups often challenge dominant power structures without guarantees of success.

A society becomes postmigrant when the distinction between »migrant« and »non-migrant« loses its explanatory power—a distinction, however, that was still central to Jochen Oltmer's conception of (historical) migration regimes and negotiation processes. In these new contexts, attempts to reassert cultural hegemony risk undermining democratic norms. This often produces racialized discourses and reflects broader phenomena of social anomie (Durkheim 1981) and ideological antinomies (Mouffe 2000; Gramsci 1971). However, these tensions also open up new possibilities: If migration is continually renegotiated, then belonging can be as well. In this sense, *Aushandlung* becomes both an analytical or heuristic and a normative tool—a way to understand conflict and to envision inclusive futures.

Oltmer's inspiring contribution lies in demonstrating that migration is not merely an empirical reality to be acknowledged and managed, but a relational and political process that reveals the deeper layers of democratic life. His historical approach underscores that the terms and concepts under which people move, settle, and belong are never final; they are always contingent, open to challenge, and subject to transformation. In honoring his work, we recognize *Aushandlung* not only as a method of analysis but as a democratic practice—one that continually invites us to reimagine who »we« are, and on what terms we want to live together. Perhaps one day, we will simply decide that there is no longer a »we« left to negotiate. At that time, we will be able to pack our things and move toward a new place we might call home, in negotiation with others over how to shape and drape this place we might call *Heimat*.

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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 dissolvment 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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Isabella Löhr

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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