

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

---

Dr. Marcel Berlinghoff, Prof. Dr. Andreas Pott, Dr. David Templin  
Institute for Migration Research and Intercultural Studies (IMIS), Osnabrück University

Discussion Forum: Negotiating Migration / Zeitschrift für Migrationsforschung – Journal of Migration Studies (ZMF) 2025 5 (1): 5–12, <https://doi.org/10.48439/377>

## 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; Lübbe 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.

## References

- Bade, Klaus J., and Jochen Oltmer. 2004. *Normalfall Migration*. Bonn: Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung.
- Bade, Klaus J., Pieter C. Emmer, Leo Lucassen, and Jochen Oltmer, eds. 2012. *The Encyclopedia of European Migration and Minorities: From the Seventeenth Century to the Present*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Bommes, Michael. 2010. Migration Research in Germany: The Emergence of a Generalised Research Field in a Reluctant Immigration Country. In *National Paradigms of Migration Research*, eds. Dietrich Thränhardt and Michael Bommes, 127–185. Göttingen: V&R unipress.
- Boswell, Christina. 2009. *The Political Uses of Expert Knowledge. Immigration Policy and Social Research*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Deutschlandfunk Kultur. 2017. »Oft wird das Bemühen um Anpassung nicht gezählt«. Jochen Oltmer zur Integrationsdebatte. *Deutschlandfunk Kultur*, 11.8.2017, <https://www.deutschlandfunkkultur.de/jochen-oltmer-zur-integrationsdebatte-oft-wird-das-bemuehen-100.html> (Zugriff: 1.8.2025).
- Drotbohm, Heike, and Boris Nieswand. 2014. Einleitung: Die reflexive Wende in der Migrationsforschung. In *Kultur, Gesellschaft, Migration*, eds. Heike Drotbohm and Boris Nieswand, 1–37. Springer: Wiesbaden.
- Espahangizi, Kijan. 2022. *Der Migration-Integration-Komplex: Wissenschaft und Politik in einem (Nicht-)Einwanderungsland, 1960–2010*. Konstanz: Konstanz University Press.
- Griese, Hartmut M., ed. 1984. *Der gläserne Fremde: Bilanz und Kritik der Gastarbeiterforschung und Ausländerpädagogik*. Opladen: Leske + Budrich.
- Hornbacher-Schönleber, Selma. 2024. »Waffen im politischen Kampf«. Historiker über Migrationsbegriffe. *taz*, 17.9.2024, <https://taz.de/Historiker-ueber-Migrationsbegriffe/!6028786/> (Zugriff: 1.8.2025).
- Lübbe, Sascha. 2024. Migrationsforscher Jochen Oltmer: »Arbeitsmigration hat es schon immer gegeben«. *Der Freitag*, 29.5.2024, <https://www.freitag.de/autoren/derfreitag/migrationsforscher-jochen-oltmer-arbeitsmigration-hat-es-immer-schon-gegeben> (Zugriff: 1.8.2025).
- Marschalck, Peter. 2004. Zur Geschichte der Migrationsforschung in Deutschland. In *Abwanderung und Migration in Mecklenburg und Vorpommern*, eds. Nikolaus Werz and Reinhard Nuthmann, 19–35. Wiesbaden: VS Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften.
- Oltmer, Jochen, ed. 2002. *Migrationsforschung und Interkulturelle Studien: Zehn Jahre IMIS*. Osnabrück: Rasch.
- Oltmer, Jochen. 2005. *Migration und Politik in der Weimarer Republik*. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht.
- Oltmer, Jochen. 2012a. *Globale Migration: Geschichte und Gegenwart*. Munich: C.H. Beck.

- Oltmer, Jochen, ed. 2012b. *Nationalsozialistisches Migrationsregime und ›Volksgemeinschaft‹*. Paderborn: Schöningh.
- Oltmer, Jochen. 2018. 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.
- Oltmer, Jochen. 2023. Konstante der Menschheitsgeschichte. Flucht. *Deutschlandfunk Kultur*, 13.12.2023, <https://www.deutschlandfunkkultur.de/flucht-ist-keine-ausnahme-sondern-konstante-der-menschheitsgeschichte-dlf-kultur-9af52a01-100.html> (Zugriff: 1.8.2025).
- Oltmer, Jochen, Axel Kreienbrink, and Carlos Sanz Díaz, eds. 2012. *Das ›Gastarbeiter‹-System: Arbeitsmigration und ihre Folgen in der Bundesrepublik Deutschland und Westeuropa*. Munich: Oldenbourg.
- Pott, Andreas, Christoph Rass, and Frank Wolff, eds. 2018. *Was ist ein Migrationsregime? What Is a Migration Regime?*. Wiesbaden: Springer.
- Reinecke, Christiane. 2021. *Die Ungleichheit der Städte: Urbane Problemzonen im postkolonialen Frankreich und der Bundesrepublik*. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht.
- Ruhkopf, Jan. 2023. *Institutionalisierte Unschärfe: Ordnungskonzepte und politisches Verwalten im Bundesvertriebenenministerium 1949–1961*. Göttingen: Wallstein.
- Stielike, Laura, Philipp Schäfer, Maurice Stierl, and Inken Bartels. 2024. The Moral Economies of Reflexive Migration Studies. *Migration Studies* 12 (3): 1–17.
- Wimmer, Andreas. 2005. *Kultur als Prozess: Zur Dynamik des Aushandelns von Bedeutungen*. Wiesbaden: VS Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften.
- Wimmer, Andreas. 2025. The Agenda Setter: How Steven Vertovec’s Work Mirrored and Advanced Major Shifts in Migration Research. *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 48 (9): 1740–1751.