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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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