Linking Immigration Policies and Migrants’ Journeys: An Interdisciplinary Endeavor

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Migration and the Political Will for Control

Both the interests of nation states to manage migration and the behavior of migrants during their individual journeys have mutually reinforcing effects on the design and functioning of contemporary migration regimes. This assumption has motivated the interdisciplinary approach of this volume. The aim is to understand how immigration policies affect migrants’ journeys and vice versa. We want to find out whether or not the assumptions that lead to the design of immigration policies reflect reality. Does border control prevent irregular immigration? And what is the role of the various actors, including the countries of origin, transit, and arrival, and the migrants themselves?

In order to answer these questions, we bring together insights from political science and ethnographic field work—two disciplines which have so far debated their insights mainly within separate research frameworks. The articles take into account the interests of the migrants’ countries of origin, transit and arrival, as well as the motives and strategies of the migrants themselves. The resulting findings are relevant to both policy makers and scientific experts, but also to anyone interested in governing migration.

Our joint efforts started from the observation that migration has increasingly been perceived as a challenge to modern nation states since the end of the Cold War. The globalization of entrepreneurial activities, evolving common markets, and the fall of the Iron Curtain have led to greatly increased border-crossing movements. Worldwide, the media present images of places where peace, education, welfare, and happiness seem to be easier to access, and modern traffic infrastructure has further facilitated the migration process.

Politicians and citizens in the countries of arrival such as the U.S. and the member states of the European Union feared that migration flows would blur territorial borders, challenge stable political environments, disturb systems of values, and flood the welfare systems. Migration has provoked heated debates about ‘good’ and ‘bad’ immigrants, their rights to acquire full citizenship and their rights to vote, about the proliferation of low-wage employment and crimes committed by immigrants, about the politics of cultural and religious diversity, and about possibilities and limitations of inclusion. In short, increasing global migration has often been perceived as questioning
the traditional social, political, economic, and cultural policies of nation states.

Ever since migration was identified as a risk, European and North American democracies have developed risk avoidance strategies and tightened their migration regimes—often with the support of the majority of their citizens. Both the U.S. and the EU have developed a self-centered and defensive approach with the objective of channeling migration. For this purpose, the governments have sharpened the distinction between legal and illegal immigration. Regular migration within common markets was facilitated, but severely limited at the external frontiers through various and “increasingly confusing restrictions on entry, stay, and participation” (Bade 2004: 351). People who do not meet these conditions but still attempt to cross the borders are regarded as criminals. Countries of arrival consider such ‘irregular’ migration a problem that must be minimized. To do this, both the U.S. and the EU have tried to optimize their instruments for managing immigration.

Generally speaking, the decision as to which migrants are welcome and which are authorized to cross the border is a purely political one—not just because it is made by politicians, but also because there is no ‘objective’, value-free basis for designing a best possible migration policy. It is often based on economic and national security considerations, as well as on human security considerations regarding refugee and asylum status, among other things (Graham/Poku 2000).

Labor immigration policies are intended to benefit the national labor markets through ‘quality selection’, classifying potential immigrants according to their qualifications into highly skilled, low-skilled and unskilled migrants. Depending on their qualification level, immigrants can be employed in different economic sectors. In order to attract highly skilled migrants, the U.S. adopted the United States Permanent Resident Card, known informally as the green card, after the end of the Second World War, which allows immigrants to work and live permanently in the U.S. The European Union copied the idea and in 2009 adopted a directive introducing the so-called Blue Card. However, it has not been as effective as the green card (Council of the EU 2009) and is being debated controversially (Angenendt/Parkes 2010).

‘Mobility partnerships’ are another recent attempt of the EU to channel labor migration. In return for the limited access to EU member states, the eligible countries must support the EU in preventing irregular migration (European Commission 2007).

The other dimension of considerations underlying the migration policies mentioned above are security concerns. Migrants who are not welcome but come to Europe or the U.S. anyway are portrayed by policy makers as a
European and American political decision makers argue that the protection of the borders and the territorial integrity of the nation states is a natural necessity because ignorance of these principles undermines a state’s sovereignty and causes present and future threats to the domestic society. In this context of an increasing securitization of migration movements, migration control has become a popular mechanism to protect societies against the perceived external ‘threat’ of immigration (Ibrahim, 2005). This control finds expression in various forms, including internal control in U.S. and EU member state territory, external control such as control and surveillance by border guards at borders with third countries, control exercised by airline staff and other non-state actors, and control exercised by neighboring countries such as Morocco and Mexico.

Research on border control techniques and on the underlying “speech act” of securitization (Wæver et al. 1993) has increased in the last decades, mainly in the discipline of political science (cf. Bigo 2001; Buzan et al. 1998; Huysmans 2000; Weiner 1995). Even so, political scientists often fail to recognize how these policies influence the migrants themselves, their decisions, and their journeys. The authors of this volume contribute to filling this research gap by focusing on the impact of immigration policies on migrants, taking into account the political dimension of the ongoing negotiation of migration policies.

While it is unquestioned that states have readjusted their migration and border management policies, it remains controversial whether or not these readjustments have been adequate to reach the political objectives. Recent estimates put the number of undocumented migrants staying within the EU-27 in 2008 at 1.9 to 3.8 million (HWWI 2009: 4), with millions of people believed to be waiting in countries neighboring the EU for a chance to enter the European Union irregularly (Bade 2004: 353 ff.). For the U.S., official statistics estimate that the number of irregular immigrants increased by 515,000 during the period 2000 to 2006 (Hoefer et al. 2007: 3). At the beginning of 2009, the Department of Homeland Security, which is in charge of immigration matters, estimated the total number of undocumented migrants to be between 10.8 and 12 million. This signifies a slight decrease over the previous

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1 The following quote is an example of this official rhetoric: “Europol supports law enforcement activities by producing reports and assessments of the threat from organized illegal immigration” (Europol 2008: 6).
2 Huysmans defined the securitization of migration as the “political construction of migration [that] increasingly refers to the destabilizing effects of migration on domestic integration and to the dangers for public order it implied” (Huysmans 2000).
3 Concerning the industry of migration management, see the interdisciplinary research network on Migration Industry and Markets for managing migration (The MIM Network). [online] Available at: http://www.diiis.dk/sw101546.asp [Accessed December 4, 2010].
years due to the economic downturn in the U.S. in 2007 and 2008 that caused Mexican-born U.S. residents to lose their jobs and reduced undocumented immigration numbers (Associated Press, February 9, 2010; see Bloch/Rocha Silva and Staudt/García-Ríos in this volume).

Are the Policies Suitable for Controlling Migration?

As we mentioned earlier, the central objective of this book is to scrutinize the migration control measures. Are these institutions and policies up to the challenges that present themselves? How are they implemented? How do migrants—the target group of these measures—act and react? And what are possible unintended effects of migration policies?

With regard to rationalist theories, we see one possible source of error in the fact that political and administrative decision makers tend to perceive migration as something abstract, as a movement of a large and homogenous group of people. Human rights and refugee organizations seem to be the only ones interested in calling public attention to the fact that immigrants are actually individuals, whereas nation states often do not anticipate the individual strategies of migrants. This abstraction from individuals to masses and from specific events to phenomena or threats makes it easier to justify border control (hardly anyone would dare speak of “combating” or “fighting” illegal immigrants). However, this generalization also largely ignores how and why migrants decide to migrate in the first place. It is therefore unclear whether the policy measures are suitable to sway people’s individual decisions about entering the European Union or the U.S.

In order to create a more systematic basis to answer our question regarding the appropriateness of border management policies, we first operationalized “migration” at the level of individual migrants. We examined, with reference to ethnographic research or, where this was not available, to quantitative statistics, what happened when North American and European migration control policies were implemented or altered. In addition, to investigate intended and unintended consequences of migration control policies, we closely examined how individual migrants reacted and whether or not the different measures influenced their behavior.

However, the depersonalization of migration policies may not be the only factor that causes inefficiency. Rationalist theories, including theories on international relations, contend that the disregard of the political strategies of negotiation partners may be a second source of error. This implies that both the EU and the U.S. wrongly consider themselves to be the most powerful actor in the game, able to dictate decisions top-down and to solve problems technically without being forced to adapt their political programs to the de-
mands and perceptions of others. While this may be true in general, actors who seem to be marginal at first glance may also derive significant power from various sources, such as from coalition capacity or blackmailing capacity. Strategic actors have to consider the interests and strategies of such “significant actors” to avoid undesired effects (Sartori 2005: 108 f.). Therefore, we were also interested in the interests and roles of the various nation states involved in the political negotiations on current and future migration policies.

The book focuses primarily on the impact of border control in two major areas of immigration, the European Union and the United States of America. The EU and the U.S. face similar challenges resulting from irregular migration, ranging from border control technologies to legalization processes to civil rights movements. The majority of articles in this book deal with the European Union, for two reasons. First, the EU has more neighbors than the U.S. and thus there are more potential countries of origin and transit. Second, assuming that the political, social, economic, and cultural contexts may affect the functioning of EU border control, it was necessary to cover countries with varying contexts to avoid misinterpretation.

Interdisciplinarity as a Distinguishing Feature of the Book

Research on migration and migration policies is usually strictly separated along different disciplines. However, we were interested in overcoming this separateness, so we decided to bring together scholars from various academic backgrounds, ranging from political science to sociology to anthropology. All of these disciplines have extensive expertise in the study of individual behavior, social interactions, and the effects of institutions.

Ethnographers generally focus more on human behavior—in our case the questions of how individuals select their routes and modes of migration and how this is connected with other people and the overall social and political context. Migration control is a way used by a state to effect a certain behavior in a specific group of human beings. In other words, the controlling states seek to physically prevent and deter migrants from crossing their borders. This is coupled with the expectation that irregular migrants give up their plan to emigrate when they perceive the borders to be insurmountable. However, ethnographic studies have shown that in many cases migrants do not act as expected. Our preliminary studies on Morocco, Spain, and the U.S. indicated that migrants often continue their border-crossing attempts despite extensive control measures. Another phenomenon is that migrants accept control measures as given and organize their lives around them in interim settlements along borders and through new forms of self-organization in camps within the transit zones, which affects the lives of many people, including non-
migrants. The articles presented in this book investigate whether there is empirical evidence for this in various transit countries.

Generally speaking, the world of 2011 is characterized by a fragmented world order and a diffuse perception of threats to security. This leads to changes in the ways in which societies conceive of themselves, particularly with regard to the definition of ‘the other’\(^4\). The role of migrants within national identity constructions\(^5\) and their possible marginalization are another potential effect of border management. The preliminary studies observed the emergence of a hostile, xenophobic environment for migrants in the country of arrival, which includes aspects of criminalization of immigrants and the linking of the topic to security discourses, which is critically discussed as the “securitization” of migration (e.g., Huysmans 2000; Ibrahim 2005). At the same time, certain portions of the host society, particularly individuals living in the border area, seem to show solidarity with undocumented immigrants. The analyses in this book are intended to clarify these observations by taking into consideration the general perception of migration, which differs considerably across national contexts.

While political scientists are also interested in the topic of ‘irregular’ migration, their main interest lies in the overarching research questions of strategic action, the legitimacy and the efficiency of public institutions and public policies, and policy change. They want to understand how institutions, regulations, and policies (such as border regimes) are developed and negotiated, whether they show the intended effects, how this functioning is affected by different context variables, and how institutions change over time. Analyses by political scientists usually pay much more attention to the level of nation states, to their interests, and to the power relationship between countries of origin, transit, and arrival than ethnographic studies do. Such aspects should not be ignored when examining the effects of border regimes. One of the challenging observations regarding the changing migration regime is that the U.S. and the EU member states delegate the task of migration control to states of origin and transit. Our preliminary studies indicated that the behavior of undocumented migrants is not just affected by the policies of (reluctantly) ‘receiving’ countries or state unions such as the U.S. and the EU, respectively, but also by the policies of countries of origin and transit. We assumed that their measures can “reinforce” or “soften” the original objective of immigration control of the EU and the U.S., depending on their own interests.

Given the explorative character of the research on the topic, the lack of theory and the small number of countries whose border regime effects are to

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\(^5\) See, for example, the discussions on “societal security”, according to which a “survival of society is a question of identity” (Wæver et al. 1993: 24).
be determined, we decided to collect qualitative, in-depth country studies to
determine the complex causal relationships between actors. We invited eth-
nographers and political scientists who are experts in the field of migration
research to contribute to a common book project. The interdisciplinary nature
of this volume is its most distinguishing feature in methodological terms.

This book is based on two workshops. The first workshop, with six of
the authors, was held at the 13th International Metropolis Conference in
Bonn in October 2008. Preliminary versions of the papers were discussed
and a joint study group was initiated. The second workshop, with additional
authors, took place at the European Academy in Berlin in 2010. Based on the
discussions at these workshops, the articles were finalized following a similar
structure, which is outlined below.

Structure of the Book and the Articles

Based on the assumption that both the interests of nation states and the be-
havior of migrants have mutually reinforcing effects on the design and func-
tioning of contemporary migration regimes, and using the theoretical consid-
erations outlined above, we derived the following research questions for the
authors of the articles\(^6\): From an ethnographic point of view it is important to
learn more about two questions: How do migrants react to the policies during
their journey? How do these policies influence their settlement in the coun-
tries of transit or arrival? Along with this, the authors were also invited to
include answers to the following questions which are especially relevant for
political scientists: In what way do the different national interests of coun-
tries of origin, transit, and arrival influence the implementation of migration
control policies initiated by the EU and the U.S.? How do the policies of the
countries of origin and transit affect the initial objectives of the EU and the
U.S.?

The country studies are based either on the evidence of the empirical
field work conducted by the authors or on empirical secondary data. To en-
sure consistency, all papers start by describing the general situation of their
national case study regarding migration patterns and the institutional setting.
Following this, they discuss the linkages between the policies of the coun-
tries of arrival, transit, and origin, and the behavior of migrants. The focus is
on the migration process itself—that is, the journey—rather than on the mi-
grants’ behavior after arriving in the receiving state.

\(^6\) For summaries of the findings and their interpretation, see our Conclusion in the
end of the volume.
Overall, the book is structured in the following way: The first part is concerned with the impact of national and European migration policies on migrants’ journeys. It starts with an article by Sandra Gil Araújo (Granada), which provides an introduction to the EU border regime with a strong focus on political interests and institutional outcomes. She identifies delocalization and externalization to third countries as the main characteristics of EU migration control. The harmonization of immigration, asylum, and refugee policies originally intended by the Treaty of Amsterdam (1997/1999) did not result in a consistent European approach to migration. The most popular countries of arrival, such as Italy and Spain, usually use bilateral agreements and individual implementation policies. Axel Kreienbrink (Nuremberg) analyzes the interest-based use and the effects of regularization as an instrument of migration management in Spain, the EU member country with the highest number of ‘irregular’ workers.

This introduction is followed by articles which focus on specific countries of origin and transit of undocumented migration to the EU. We chose countries with a high proportion of irregular emigration. Gerda Heck (Cologne) explores migration management and migrants’ strategies in Morocco where she conducted intense field work. Florence Tsagué Assopgoum (Siegen) gives an overview of migration policies and their implementation on the route from Senegal to Europe. Marianne Haase (Nuremberg) investigates the Europeanization of Ukraine’s migration policy and its impact on migrants. Finally, Basak Bilecen-Süoglu (Bielefeld) analyzes the case of Turkey as a bridge for people smuggling at the border between the Middle East and the EU.

The second part of the book deals with experiences migrants have had with the U.S. migration regime. As mentioned before, border management is less diverse in the U.S. than in the EU and it is concentrated along the border to Mexico. However, the U.S. migration regime has also changed over the course of time (see Tichenor, 2009, among others), which provides the opportunity to examine the short- and long-term effects of policy changes. Avital Bloch and Ma. Alejandra Rocha Silva (Colima, Mexico) have taken this approach, focusing on the society’s response to policy changes. Their study includes an investigation of how undocumented Mexicans enter the U.S. and how they live in the country, as well as the emergence of migrant communities in California, their contacts, and their possible return to Mexico. Wayne Cornelius (San Diego) provides an evaluation of recent U.S. immigration control policies based on 4,000 interviews with Mexican migrants conducted in Mexico and in the United States between 2005 and 2008. Kathleen Staudt and Sergio Garcia-Rios (El Paso, Seattle) complement the portrait by describing the effects of migratory management with a special focus on the intervening effect of economy, public policies, and institutions in the countries of origin and arrival.
The last part of the volume traces recent efforts in empirically-based theory building regarding the effects of border management and summarizes the findings of the articles. Sabine Hess (Göttingen) was invited to contribute her reflections on the social construction of risks and fears through processes of the labeling of migration phenomena and migrant categories such as the emerging “transit migrant”. Assuming that categorizations may transport, disseminate, and perpetuate distinct perceptions of reality, we wanted to know whether and, if so, how such processes affect migration policies. Heidrun Friese (Bochum) was invited to present the concept of “hospitality”, which she applies to the events on the Italian island of Lampedusa, where Italian inhabitants and migrants spontaneously united against the politics of the Italian government. The last article of the volume draws conclusions regarding the effectiveness of the current border management policies based on the empirical analyses presented in this volume. The editors investigate how policies designed to control ‘irregular’ migration affect the behavior of (would-be) migrants and whether these policies produce unintended effects rather than achieving the objectives of the policy designers.

On the whole, we observed that interdisciplinary work is always a challenging process. We have learned that ethnographers and political scientists see the issue under investigation through completely different analytical lenses, interpret their own role as scientists in different ways, and each use their own specific concepts and terminology. The results of our joint work, however, convinced us that this interdisciplinary approach is very effective. We would like to thank the authors for contributing to this volume and for their patience in discussing their articles. Special thanks goes to the Foundation for German-American Academic Relations for generously sponsoring this project.

References


