

COMMENTARY

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# ...when the category 'migration' lost its innocence for migration scholars. And what now? A plea for dialogue

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## Introduction

As I have discovered, I genuinely enjoy anniversaries and birthday parties– not just those of people, but also those of academic journals. So it came as a pleasant surprise when I was invited by the editors of this anniversary journal to engage with a wider audience and think about *categorizations* and the challenges that migration-related categories pose for migration studies, and hence for a journal called 'Comparative Migration Studies'. As a general 'theme' for the anniversary celebration, the *CMS* editors have chosen 'critical developments in migration studies'. For me, this reflects a commitment to reflexivity and an openness to dialogue that I value highly (and I will come back to this later). Is it not the case that typically we celebrate anniversaries by *looking back instead of looking forwards*, arguably missing the opportunity to challenge ourselves?

Anyway, let's now return to the task set by the editors of *Comparative Migration Studies*, which was to question categories and categorization through a reflexive lens. Perhaps we first need to clarify what exactly is it that is at stake in 'categorizing', especially with regard to migration? To put it bluntly, I would say that the category of 'migration' has lost its innocence for migration researchers in recent years; there is no doubt about that. A growing number of scholars have become prominent and influential within (European) migration studies whose work vividly illustrates that the label 'migrant' is anything but neutral or unchanging (Bakewell, 2008; Crawley & Skleparis 2017; Drotbohm & Winters 2020; Raghuram, 2021; Glick Schiller, Çağlar, & Guldbrandsen 2006). They show that far from being objective or stable, migration-related categories– such as (im)migrant, second-generation migrant, migrant background, refugee, migrant minority and so on– are normative-moral and political categories born of the logic of the modern nation-state and intricately intertwined with the enduring legacies of history, including the complex shadows of colonialism (Wimmer & Glick Schiller 2002; Malkki, 1992; Sharma, 2020; Amelina, 2022).<sup>1</sup> In this nation-state logic, 'migrants' tend to be perceived as racialized,

<sup>1</sup> I simply cannot quote all the great work published on this issue, and I apologize to those I have left out. For a fuller discussion of this topic, watch out for my forthcoming book on 'technologies of migranticization', which I hope will be published in 2026.

poor and subordinated people, whose movements or presence are problematic and thus warrant state control (De Genova, 2017). These insights on the problematic aspects of migration-related categorization raise some fundamental questions about the production of knowledge in the field of migration studies (see also Dahinden & Pott *Forthcoming 2025*).

Firstly, it has been argued that by unreflexively mobilizing such categories, migration scholars risk replicating a nation-state logic and a (national) container conception of society. Put differently, by reproducing an ethno-national epistemology, migration scholars may inadvertently reinforce hegemonic, racialized and migranticized forms of inclusion/exclusion and power, and, in general, boost a migranticized world view. That migration studies have historically been closely intertwined with migration policies, particularly in Europe (Boswell, 2008), reinforces such ethno- and nation-centred epistemologies and the risk that migration scholars become ‘migranticizers’, so to speak (see also Dahinden & Korteweg, 2023). A second critique, which has gained momentum in recent years and which directly touches upon the ways in which migration scholars produce knowledge and use categories, concerns ahistorical theorizing: in particular the failure to consider the ways in which contemporary migration movements and mobility regimes are (at least in part) built upon historical connections generated by nation-building, colonialism, imperialism, appropriation, dispossession and decolonization—connections that are often dismissed in migration studies (and beyond) and that are often reproduced by unreflexive uses of categories (such as for example, when talking about the migration-development-nexus) (Gutiérrez Rodríguez, 2018; Raghuram & Gunjan, 2025; Mayblin & Turner 2021). Similarly, it has been observed that concepts and analysis linked to racialization entered the debate in migration studies very late while debates focused mainly on ethnicization and culturalization (Khazaei, 2025; Erel, Murji, & Nahaboo 2016). Finally, what these debates have made very clear is that migration researchers have important responsibilities that need to be taken seriously—especially today, in the context of what I would call ‘toxic debates on migration,’ where right-wing ideologies that are deeply entrenched with nationalism and racism (and sexism) have become highly normalized in many European countries. If migration scholars reproduce normative political categories and knowledge based on a migranticized world view, we then play directly into the hands of such ideologies, boosting and fortifying them.

It is also important to emphasize that, in recent decades, many scholars have sought ways to conduct migration research without reproducing nation-state or colonial categorizations in order to reduce the risk of reinforcing dominant power structures, processes of othering and inequalities (Bialas, Lukate, & Vertovec 2024; Friedrichs, Severin-Barboutie, & Heudre 2021; Menjívar, 2023). Indeed, scholars have argued that the field has undergone a ‘reflexive turn’ (Nieswand & Drotbohm 2014). However, while these debates have been active for several decades—and many articles in *Comparative Migration Studies* contributed substantially to these discussions (just to mention some of them: Anderson, 2019; Raghuram, Breines, & Gunter 2024; Levy, Pisarevskaya, & Scholten 2020; Scharrer & Saharso 2023) -, we still have not entirely solved these problems; rather, in the course of this critical debate new tensions and ambivalences have emerged. In the following I would like to delve into some of these—there are of course others—as they are of relevance not only for migration scholars (and beyond) but also for migration journals.

## What now? Tensions and ambivalences

### A need for categorization, but: why and how to do this reflexively and critically?

Of course, categorization– or the act of categorizing– is a fundamental way to understand and make sense of the world, to position both ourselves and others (Tajfel, 1981, 251–255). We cannot conduct research without categories; indeed, they are essential tools in our analytical repertoire when trying to understand ‘the world’. This is true for both qualitative and quantitative research. But as scholars we have to ask ourselves about the effects and consequences of our categorization. Hence, the question becomes *how* to use categories and *which* categories in a critical and reflexive way so as not to reproduce forms of political and normative exclusion (Dahinden, Fischer, & Menet 2021)? This is a complex issue, and it is one that students often ask me about, since they feel quite overwhelmed by the task. I do not have the space to elaborate on this question in detail, but let me briefly outline some possible avenues.

We can return to the well-known and often invoked distinction between *common sense* and *analytical categories* (or emic and etic categories) (among many Brubaker, 2004). The former are anchored in the normalization of the logic of the nation-state and naturalize the category of migration, while the latter are conceptual tools that come from different traditions in the social sciences, often developed outside migration theory (Dahinden, 2016). In such an approach migration-related categories become our *empirical material* which we will analyse with our theoretical tools. The question then becomes: Who uses migration-related categories, which actors and in which context, with what meaning and consequences? Secondly, and relatedly, we might adopt a pragmatic approach to categorization (James, 1904). Instead of asking what categories ‘are’, I propose to examine what people, states, organizations or other actors ‘do’ with certain categories, how categorization is historically and contextually situated and what the consequences of ‘using’ categories are. The critiques are not just about abstract issues of categorization, but the aim is to identify concrete effects on people’s lives, particularly those of migrantized and/or racialized individuals. In other words, I suggest investigating the *work* that categories do, their entanglement with power and the consequences (see for a similar approach in view of the category race Lentin, 2015). This allows us to delve into the analysis of the perspectival, performative and historically situated character of categories (Gillespie, Howarth, & Cornish 2012). Such a reflexive approach to categorization might help to push this debate further, at least to a certain extent.

### Moving beyond both invisibilization and hypervisibilization of ‘migration’

I argued some years ago that one way to address this issue of problematic categorization is to *de-migrantize research*: The suggestion was, among other things, to de-migrantize our research design in terms of changing the unit of analysis from the ‘group of migrants’ to the overall population in order to investigate when and how the category ‘migrant’ emerges, who is ascribed this category (or not) and when ‘migration’ becomes significant empirically, theoretically and politically. Once we have de-migrantized– and hence, taken a step back from the idea that migration is an objective category– we can see and analyse the significance of migration both to the people themselves and to others, hence one can see how *migrantization* intervenes in terms of exclusion, power and in and beyond the state (Dahinden, 2016; Wyss & Dahinden, 2022). This does not mean that we should ignore the category of migration or render it invisible in our research. On

the contrary, I suggest investigating when and at what points migranticization occurs and what consequences it entails. Nation-states, nationalism and coloniality hold significant weight in today's world— probably more than ever— and border, integration and naturalization regimes create rights and non-rights, hierarchies and a great deal of violence. Therefore, the suggestion is not to overlook migration-related categorizations, but first and foremost to analyse how and where they are produced, their significance, the actors involved and their consequences. This is even more important given that categories such as the 'migrant' (as much as race) do not have fixed or unchanging meaning— these categories are "floating signifiers" (Hall, 1997). Hence, migranticization works differently at different times as much as at different places. The way in which different configurations of 'migrant others' became constructed and governed historically has continuously altered to this day, but it was always related to power.

Interestingly, recent reflexive scholarship criticizes the *hypervisibilization* of migration, both in research and in public and political debates. Such normalized hypervisibilization can be observed, for example, when migration is exceptionalized in a mobile world (Hui, 2016), or when migration is presented as an anomaly in a nation-state-dominated world. To de-migranticize is, therefore, a proposition to counter such hypervisibilization of migration. However, I think it is fair to ask whether something is lost when we de-migranticize and adopt such a reflexive approach to migration-related categories. For instance, reflecting on his ethnographic research on place-making and the organization of difference in a small Swiss valley, Charmillot (2023) notes that it would have been possible to provide more space to include and theorize issues regarding people assigned to migranticized categories. However, he deliberately adopted a de-migranticized research design, encompassing the entire valley population rather than focusing solely on migranticized individuals. Yet, in his view, this approach might represent a limitation, potentially stemming from an overcautious effort to avoid perpetuating nation-state logics. Notably, Charmillot contends that this de-migranticized methodology may have distanced him from investigating key sites integral to the 'migration industries,' such as migrant associations, refugee centers, and migration administrations. His reflections are particularly thought-provoking, as he urges researchers, *à juste titre*, to be vigilant and consider what may be lost when a reflexive and de-migranticized approach is taken. Yet, I would argue that focusing on crystallization points and moments of production of *migranticization*, such as happens in migrant associations, national statistics and so on, does not contradict de-migranticization as such (or at least not the way I understand it). A de-migranticized research design and investigating moments of production of migranticization are two sides of the same coin while representing two different angles. Finally, I argue that a shift from 'migration' towards the analysis of technologies of migranticization additionally allows us to move beyond both hypervisibilization as much as invisibilization of migration.

#### **From migration towards the analysis of technologies of migranticization**

Tudor (2018, 1058) introduces the concept of 'migratism' to point to the power relations that ascribe migration to certain bodies and establish non-migration as the norm of national and European belonging. In my reading, this means that if migration scholars use the category of migration unreflexively, they become crucial actors in creating migratism. Or in my words, we might say that migration studies themselves run the risk

of becoming an intrinsic part of what I call the technologies of migrantization (Dahinden, 2022). This concept is a continuation of my former work on de-migrantization and it is strongly anchored in a network of ideas from other scholars who have pointed to similar processes (among others Tudor, 2018; Scheel & Tazzioli 2022; Favell, 2022). By technologies of migrantization I refer to those sets of performative practices and techniques that ascribe migratory status to certain people (and not to all) and thereby (re-)establish an a priori difference from 'non-migrant citizens'. I use 'technology' in Foucault's sense, hence I am interested in how systems of knowledge and power emerge, become intertwined and with which effects (Villadsen, 2024, p. 33). The concept of technologies of migrantization allows for analysis of entangled and complex forms of migrantization as they occur on legal, administrative, social, symbolic or political levels. They make visible the concrete tools— laws, politics, representations, discursive elements and so on— that produce, implement and reproduce power and knowledge related to migrantization on an everyday basis. Technologies of migrantization therefore give us insights into the 'where' and 'how' of migrantization. Complementarily, I consider migrantization as a technology of power and governance affecting resource distribution, regulation, population control and so on. In other words, technologies of migrantization place people in a distinct hierarchy (within and between nation-states), which is accompanied by an unequal distribution of societal symbolic and material resources, while affirming a national 'we' within a system of global inequalities and nation-states. In this sense, the distinction between 'migrant others' and 'non-migrant citizens' has become one of the most far-reaching in today's world, producing important forms of exclusion and inclusion, violence, rights and non-rights. But how can migration studies deal with the risk of becoming part of technologies of migrantization, and what does all this mean for a migration journal like *Comparative Migration Studies (CMS)*?

### **To look forward**

How can a migration journal engage with these debates, take responsibility, adopt a reflexive approach towards categorization and avoid both the hypervisibility and invisibility of migration? Or to put it bluntly: Should we stop researching 'migration' altogether? Should the journal drop the term 'migration' from its title? In my view, these are not the most handy solutions: However, there is a need to disseminate alternative ways to frame public and political debates about migration and to counteract migrantized world views and hence avoid sustaining right-wing ideologies. This is where CMS could (and does) play a role. But also, a next step might be to ask: How can we, as scholars and as contributors to migration journals, meaningfully engage in these critical debates? My suggestion may not be novel, but I advocate for fostering dialogue and delving deeper into discussions about these tensions and ambivalences. For this, we need a dedicated space where such discussions can take place. CMS, and other journals, can play a crucial role by creating platforms that facilitate these exchanges. In fact, CMS is one of the few journals I know in the social sciences— or specifically in migration studies— that offers a commentary series designed for this purpose. This series brings together scholars with diverse epistemological and theoretical perspectives to engage in dialogue, respond to one another and debate key issues. In these commentaries, critical issues in migration studies— such as self-referentiality, uneven internationalization, the formation of epistemic communities, the missing link between migration studies and race, or the

neo-colonial character of integration— were raised and discussed. The contributions represent invaluable, often contentious, moments of scholarly dialogue. If I could wish for something for *CMS's* anniversary, it would be the continuation and strengthening of formats that foster such dialogic engagement. These spaces for open and critical exchange are essential for pushing the field forward.

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