

Special Issue Introduction

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Re-searching access: what do attempts at studying migration control tell us about the state?

Contributors to this special issue realised that reflecting on experiences of getting access (or not) can tell us something important about the institutions we aimed to study and, more broadly, about the migration control field. Put differently, attempts at approaching and approximating state actors within a charged field exposed us to some of its most fundamental organising principles. We have, therefore, set ourselves the task in this issue of *SA/AS* to ask and answer the following question: What do attempts at studying migration control tell us about the state? Our exercise is, thus, squarely set as an attempt to intervene in a burgeoning debate around the ways in which the ‘anthropology of the state’ can develop. Both the issues at stake – the management of undesired others – and the field in which we conduct our studies, migration control administrations, are indeed changing to become acutely central to the governing of our societies. By gathering findings from different research projects across Europe, this special issue offers a comparative perspective on some of the most salient features of the migration control field from the eyes of ethnographic researchers in search of access.

Key words getting access, deportation, ethnography, migration studies, Europe

Introduction

Controlling the movement of migrants and refugees across state borders is one of the most heated political topics in the 21st century. Policies for receiving and determining the status of refugees, surveilling international borders, and detaining and deporting illegalised migrants are increasingly the stuff on which elections are lost or won in democratic liberal states across the world. Critical social scientific research has powerfully responded to the rise in the political and public importance that is given to migration control and deportation regimes (Bosworth 2014; Coutin 2015; De Genova and Peutz 2010; Kalir 2019a; Walters 2002). Ethnographic studies have scrutinised policies and procedures on different levels of governance (Drotbohm and Hasselberg 2015; Eule *et al.* 2019; Kalir 2019b), and documented and analysed the lived realities of mobile persons located at the receiving ends of these multiple governing forms (Kalir 2010; Schapendonk 2018; Scheel 2017; Wyss 2019).

This special issue brings together contributions from scholars who ethnographically studied migration control in different European states. Contributors attempted to examine the work in different state institutions that were crucially positioned in the management of unauthorised, suspicious or undesired non-citizens. Focusing on state

agencies in charge of migration control, we sought to advance our understanding on the discourses and practices of those who are involved in the everyday implementation of rules and regulations. Accordingly, our informants were state officials – high-ranked civil servants, street-level bureaucrats, police agents – whose job it was to translate sensitive and often oppressive state policies into actual practices.

Yet a thorny issue stood between our ambition and our ability to generate social scientific knowledge on the practical and mundane implementation of migration control. It was the need to get access, to be allowed in and to use ethnographic methods that required proximity to state officials. Getting access is always a delicate matter that necessitates much attention, careful preparation and perseverance (Chaudhuri 2017; Di Trani 2008; Fresia 2018; Reeves 2010). Yet, studying state actors in a politically highly sensitive field has proven to be particularly challenging. The securitisation of migration (Huysmans 2006) has turned the exercise of mobility across borders into a national security concern for many states. Studying this securitised field has become a complicated matter that often requires strenuous struggles for access.

Notably, notwithstanding our struggles, the joy in managing eventually to get some access tends to outdo the hardship. The desire to focus on the actual research and the subsequent analysis of our findings habitually leads researchers to retrospectively pigeonhole the ‘getting access’ story to a paragraph or two in a standard methodology section in academic articles. In this sense, getting access is treated as an event rather than a process, as a hurdle one needed to determinately jump over rather than a wave one had to constantly surf in an effort to stay on board. In this special issue, contributors reflect on their need to negotiate and renegotiate access, to establish and re-establish contacts, with different counterparts at different locations in different moments.

A growing and welcome trend in anthropology, as well as in other disciplines, endows reflections on getting access more importance, by moving beyond a narrow focus on how researchers simply managed to ‘get in’ and ‘be there’. Insightful reflections on getting access have shown the significance of acknowledging researchers’ subjectivity, their personal characteristics and positionality in the field, with methodological and ethical dilemmas that surface in the process of this intricate process (Lavanchy 2013; van Liempt and Bilger 2009). There rise imperative questions that concern the responsibility of researchers to their informants, their accountability to colleagues and funders, as well as the validity of their professional integrity (Bosworth 2014; Maillet *et al.* 2017).

Contributors to this special issue realised that reflecting on experiences of getting access (or not) can tell us something important about the institutions we aimed to study and, more broadly, about what we call the ‘migration control field’. By the term ‘migration control field’ we refer to the entire spectrum of actors whose operations are implicated, more or less directly and intentionally, in producing increased levels of surveillance, monitoring and, ultimately, legal and spatial exclusion of undesired non-citizens. These actors notably include state agencies (embassies, police units, migration and asylum agencies, detention facilities, etc.), but also parastatal and international organisations (Frontex, IOM, UNHCR, etc.), as well as local and international NGOs (Red Cross, Caritas, etc.) and private companies. Clearly then, the hybrid field of migration control is complex, fraught with contradicting and even opposing approaches and goals, and often subjected to political contestation, public scrutiny and debate (Eule 2014).

Hence, attempts at approaching and approximating state actors within a charged field exposed us to some of its most fundamental organising principles. We have, therefore, set ourselves the task in this special issue to ask and answer the following question:

What do attempts at studying migration control tell us about the state? Our exercise is, thus, squarely set as an attempt to intervene in a burgeoning debate around the ways in which the ‘anthropology of the state’ can develop, as both the issues at stake – the management of undesired others – and the field in which we conduct our studies – migration control administrations – are changing and becoming acutely central to the governing of our societies (Anderson 2013; Hampshire 2013). By gathering findings from different research projects across Europe, this special issue offers a comparative perspective on some of the most salient features of the migration control field from the eyes of ethnographic researchers in search of access.

On another level, our accounts also evidence the implications that getting and managing access have for the ways academic research gets reshaped and remoulded, not always to our liking. The access we ended up obtaining varied, at times substantially, from what, where and whom we sought to study. The process of getting access, thus, crucially influenced the kind of data that we gathered and the kind of knowledge that we could subsequently produce. We therefore pay attention to the ways in which critical migration scholars may play, willingly or not, a role in reshaping or reproducing the migration control field which they attempt to study as independent outsiders (Horvath *et al.* 2017). In the following sections we tease out the main insights coming out of our reflections on getting access.

Getting access to a fragmented field

Studying the state ethnographically is never an easy task, for two essential reasons. First, defining what and where precisely is the state one should be studying can be a disputed task among scholars. Second, the state, whatever it is that we understand by it, can resist attempts at studying it in ways that anthropologists believe should be done. Indeed, in conducting research on the state, one must always reckon that ‘one aspect of its powerfulness is its ability to prevent the adequate study of the state’ (Abrams 1988: 63). Yet, as researchers have also frequently shown, ‘the state’ is not a monolithic entity that works always in a concerted fashion to achieve agreed-on goals. Instead, when studying the state, one usually encounters a complex web of institutions, some working in tandem while others having opposing approaches and diverging views on the same subject matters (Aretxaga 2003; Bourdieu 2012). Moreover, state institutions are staffed with civil servants and bureaucrats who all bring to the job their own views, ambitions, sense of ethics, and so on (Miaz 2017; Vrăbiescu and Kalir 2018). As a result, researchers regularly confront a state that is at times coherent, united and collaborative, and at other times fraught with contradictions, frictions and inefficiencies (Eule *et al.* 2019).

We concur with Philip Abrams about the need for critical scholars to unmask the state by studying its material manifestations (‘state-system’) and ideological reifications (‘state-idea’), which are produced under the more abstract and obfuscating notion of ‘the state’. Yet, we claim that taking up this task in the migration control field is particularly difficult, not only for the more generic abovementioned reasons that have to do with the inherent muddle of the state, but also because migration control has become hyper-securitised and it hinges on other fronts like the ‘war on terrorism’ or the entanglement of criminal law and migration policies, often termed crimmigration (Stumpf 2013).

The migration control field is therefore highly charged and mistakes made by officials operating within it can carry severe consequences for the political system and ignite public debates and even public outcries (Ellermann 2009). Such an explosive potentiality can easily be translated into an elevated defence mechanism to protect and keep the working of agencies within the field away from any critical eyes. The deferral of researchers' requests can be easily justified on the ground of confidentiality of data or the risk that shared information can cause to security operations. In other words, one can hypothesise that the higher the stakes become in a given field, the lower the chances are that politicians and civil servants will agree to have their practices studied by outsiders (Bosworth and Kellezi 2016; Fassin 2011; Satzewich 2014). While this was certainly the case in many of our experiences, our diverse case studies have proven insightful in bringing more nuance to an understanding of the dynamics that influence getting access (or not).

The dispersed and fragmented character that 'the state' takes on in the migration control field comes out prominently in contributions to this special issue. Various state agencies are tasked with enforcing different procedures and regulations that only in sum can make sense as an overall migration policy. Getting access to one agency in the field might not guarantee access to any other one. This means that having access becomes a cumbersome and lengthy process in which the researcher might only get a very partial exposure to a particular segment of the field. Thus, thinking in an inductive way – that our experience in studying one agency can tell us something more general about the entire field – can be easily proven a logical mistake.

Consider, for example, the number of state institutions that are implicated in any decision to deport an illegalised migrant: processing the identity and status of illegalised migrants (police, refugee status determination, immigration services, judges), issuing a deportation order (government ministries, police, judges, lawyers), locating and arresting deportable people (police), detention (often requires again the intervention of a judge, medical staff, lawyers, interpreters and of course the personnel of detention facilities) and finally deportation (special police units, medical staff, transportation companies). In addition, migration control work regularly calls for international cooperation between embassies, the implementation of bilateral agreements, as well as extensive collaboration with supra-state bodies (IOM and other UN institutions, Frontex, EASO, etc.), and civil society organisation (for example, in running so-called 'voluntary return programmes'). Consequently, individuals who enact the state often operate at different levels simultaneously both within nation-state structures and international networks that constitute 'transnational policy making from below' (Infantino 2019). These operations, as we often observed, are fraught with miscommunication and disorder, at times severed by power relationships and competition among different agencies.

The multiplicity of agencies and operations makes studying the migration control field extremely cumbersome and renders access to one site partly dependent on other attempts made in other sites. In her contribution, Ioana Vrăbiescu (2019, this issue) analyses how this transnational involvement finally contributed to her gaining access to the French deportation system after she had first established contacts in Romania with the French liaison officer. This highlights that the fragmented and transnational character of the migration control field lends itself to recurring attempts at different locations. A 'no' is almost never a 'no'. It more often means that one needs to either try elsewhere or try differently, not least, as Barak Kalir (2019c, this issue) shows,

by mobilising informal contacts and building on previously established rapport with informants in other agencies. Yet a 'no' can also be a full stop. In Damian Rosset and Christin Achermann's case (2019, this issue), the transnational connections between Country of Origin Information (COI) agencies allowed one powerful individual in one state to considerably hamper the access to units in other states. Katerina Rozakou (2019, this issue) relates this fragmentation of the migration control field to the proliferation of international actors involved in the reconfiguration of sovereign power during the 'migration crisis' in Greece.

Annika Lindberg and Lisa Borrelli (2019, this issue) identify another intriguing aspect related to the field's endemic fragmentation. Some of the state actors they studied – notably police officers, state border guards and prison officers – did not fully or clearly associate their work as being part of the migration control field. Hence, what academic researchers might categorise as a fragmented field is not necessarily perceived to be a 'field' in the first place by some of the actors we study. As we will see next, this raises questions about the cognitive authority over a specific field and the role that academics have in producing and reproducing the very object of their studies.

Getting access and getting lucky

Our experiences indisputably divulge the immense difficulties in getting access to the migration control field. Yet, they also undeniably show some surprising openings and the ways that unexpected interactions can lead to the granting of access. Beyond the formalities of applying for access through official channels, there are occasions on which requests from or meetings with a particular official unpredictably facilitated access that was hitherto not agreed on or even denied by other instances. In Spain, as Barak Kalir illustrates, having someone with contacts in the right places to put in a 'good word' on the researcher can facilitate remarkable access. Accumulating informal access can also over time lead to obtaining a formal approval to conduct research in certain agencies. Yet, as Damian Rosset and Christin Achermann show, the other way around is possible too: formal acceptance of the research at the higher levels of the hierarchy can be contradicted by reluctant gatekeepers below. In both configurations, officials' visions of 'the state', the actions of its many hands and heads and of its legitimacy, might explain why they decided to facilitate or block access.

As transpires from our case studies, officials who react supportively to researchers' requests for access often entertained an elevated sense of righteousness about the good and necessary work which their agency performed. This led some officials to claim that they 'have nothing to hide' and would thus be open to researchers who should 'see for themselves' rather than be fed by negative and allegedly ungrounded journalistic accounts. One should consider that many migration control agencies in Europe deal with a disturbing reputation issue. They are often criticised heavily by human rights organisations, but also by right-wing and xenophobic milieus, and are regularly portrayed in the media unfavourably. To the extent that officials trust the (relatively) objective merits of academic research, they might be more receptive to this type of study. In some cases, we met officials who were happy to work with university professors or doctoral students and to be of interest for academic purposes (see also Achermann 2009). These officials often held a high esteem for the common good of striving for transparent and accountable state policies.

Clearly, some officials might have been unaware of the potential critical edge of academic research on migration control, or, as we also found, they might share with critical scholars the need to reform the migration control field. Such critical officials openly professed their criticism of the agency in which they work, as Barak Kalir shows in the case of one director of a detention facility in Spain who claimed that he would be 'the first to leave [the detention centre] if the government decides to close it down'. We should also not discount here the effect of internal power conflicts within the migration field, which can lead certain officials to allow research of a certain unit either in spite of the position of other officials or because they believe that such a research can serve their own interest within the hierarchy of the field.

Given the gamut of officials' views of academic researchers, depositing our requests with the 'right' official inherently involves a good measure of luck. As Katerina Rozakou shows, the official permit to conduct fieldwork in the Moria camp on Lesbos would have meant something very different, if it was not for the fact that the commander of the camp was absent when she first arrived there. This meant that she negotiated her practical access with a deputy, who was willing to agree on an expansive interpretation of her formal approval. When the Moria camp commander returned from his holiday, he accepted the by then established daily presence of the researcher in the camp, although making clear that it would not have happened if he had been around in the first place. Ioana Vrăbiescu explains the element of surprise when, while requesting access to the border police in Romania, she coincidentally faced the same official who had previously been the security attaché in France, in charge of bilateral cooperation. Based on their prior acquaintance, and given the model of police alliance in managing intra-EU mobility, the official allowed for a quick and informal access to the Romanian border police.

As we discovered, the researcher's identity as a 'native' or 'foreign' in the context of the migration field under study can also influence access in unpredictable manners. As a Greek citizen, Katerina Rozakou's ability to share with some of her key informants a sense of 'cultural intimacy' (Herzfeld 1997) conceivably facilitated access in certain sites and moments. For Barak Kalir, however, it appeared to be precisely his foreignness in the Spanish context that increased his chances to get access to sites that were blocked from many local and native researchers. In the case of negotiating access to COI units, it was never entirely clear in what ways Damian Rosset's former work as a country analyst turned him into an insider or an outsider in the field and how that influenced his chances to get access as an academic researcher.

Indeed, in his contribution, Barak Kalir contends that we should consider luck as a structural feature in negotiating and achieving (or not) access. Not only can we hardly control for the officials who end up dealing with our requests for access, but such dealing is always heavily intersubjective. Different officials react differently to different researchers, given the particular characteristics of the latter. Ostensibly, the researcher's race, gender, religion, age, seniority or institutional affiliation can decisively influence the decision of any official with allowing access. The influence of being a native citizen in the country where one seeks to conduct research seems also to be unpredictable. Given the influence that all of the abovementioned variables have, in their intersubjective effects on unknown officials, in determining our access, we must come to terms with the role that luck plays in any outcome of our negotiations.

Speaking of any outcome, academic discussion of attempts to get access are extremely biased. While failures are thoroughly analysed – in order to adjust our

strategy and prepare the next attempt – our successes are glanced over, celebrated and taken to be the positive outcome of a sound research design and the competence of a skilled researcher. We thus gain our understanding on getting access mostly from cases in which this was difficult or even impossible. Yet obviously, good luck can be as revealing as bad luck in this respect. It is indeed telling that, as Annika Lindberg and Lisa Borrelli recount, officials in certain agencies shared with them a sense of surprise regarding the inconsistencies in being successful or not to obtain access to some of the other agencies in the field. Little can be certain, it seems, in negotiating access in the migration control field.

Knowledge production as a battle ground

Our contributions unequivocally demonstrate the high degree of discretionary power that officials in the migration control field enjoy. While scholarship on public administrations (Lipsky 2010), and on the migration field specifically (Achermann 2013; Kalir and Sur 2012), has amply demonstrated that discretion is inherent to its functioning, there are good reasons that explain why the migration control field in Europe is particularly fraught with discretionary power at multiple levels. For a start, some prevailing right-wing political ideas regarding non-citizens and asylum seekers may be difficult to get translated into formal rules and regulations, but they can effectively be transmitted in more informal ways that provide those in the field room for expansive interpretation. Equally, the dispersed and fragmented structure of the field calls for interminable collaborations between different state agencies. While there are attempts to regulate neatly these collaborations, they are also often implemented in practice according to the particular ideas of the individual officials in charge.

Discretionary power cuts two ways, of course. It allows for the kind of surprising openings that we discussed above with respect to dealing with supportive officials who can decide to allow us in, with little or no deliberation with other parties. At the same time, discretionary power can allow officials to engage in illegible and even illegal practices with few repercussions. On many occasions, the rejections of our requests were accompanied with no or little explanation. There also seemed to be no formalised channel to dispute these decisions. In fact, this becomes sorely evident in the case of some of our contributors who worked within a European Research Council's funded project to study migration control agencies that then denied them the possibility of doing so. It appears that the structure of scientific knowledge production does not seem to map on to the field of migration control within the European Union.

Concretely then, much of our discussions on getting access to the migration control field boils down to the following crude power dynamic: social scientific researchers seek access to conduct their studies, while many state authorities know all too well that researchers would most likely come up with critical accounts that negatively reflect on their work. Officials then use their power (position), and more particularly the 'state effect' (Mitchell 1991), to prevent access that might challenge their authority or question their conduct in the field. Hence, when discussing access to the migration control field, it is the reverse question that we need to pose: Why and under what circumstances would state authorities give academic researchers access?

In some cases, state authorities have created more structured procedures to deal with research requests. As Katerina Rozakou shows in her contribution, this is the case

of the migration field in Greece and, in particular, of hotspots such as the Moria camp that gained wide publicity in recent years. Clearly, such official procedures then filter and enable specific forms of access with important methodological and epistemological consequences for our projects. Increasingly then, our question gets reformulated in the following ways: What kind of access do we get? How do the limitations, modifications and controls of getting access shape the kind of social scientific knowledge that we can produce? Negotiating access almost always means that what is concomitantly being negotiated is the very possibility to know and to produce knowledge in a certain field. In some cases, as Damian Rosset and Christin Achermann show, getting access is straightforwardly negotiated on the basis of who holds the primary cognitive authority in and over the field: our potential informants or academic researchers. In other cases, by allowing, eventually and conditionally, access to the work of some officials in some locations and at certain moments, 'the state', as enacted by the officials with whom we interact, decisively intervenes in our ability to know 'it'.

Evidently, academic researchers should triangulate the selective information they get access to from state officials, by talking to 'clients' and other 'stakeholders' about their experiences with the same state agencies, as well as by reviewing documents, manuals and forms that are produced by the examined agencies (Achermann 2009). Moreover, reflexivity should be used as a methodological tool throughout the process of negotiating and managing access, and not simply ex-post-factum when we write up our findings and analysis (Kalir 2006). In other words, we should treat the negotiation of access as an integral part of our exercise in studying the state, whether or not it eventually yields what we requested in terms of access. We should further be aware of the modifications that are imposed on our research designs by state authorities and resist them to the best of our ability.

We do recognise that this is easier said than done, not least in the current neoliberal moment in which many academic institutions operate. Universities and funding agencies increasingly demand from researchers to conduct cutting-edge research, but also to guarantee peer-reviewed publications and even to promise quantified deliverables that allegedly justify their funding (or obtaining an academic title). These pressures then force researchers to regularly accept modified and at times severely spoiled access to the migration control field. It should also come as no surprise if more researchers will be found to have engaged in ethical transgression of their research terms, as both the pressure and ambition to get access and results are incompatible with the opacity of the field and the unchecked discretionary power of gatekeepers.

While the issue of ethics is not squarely within the scope of this special issue, we should note that all contributors persistently struggled to match the ethical guidelines and clearances they had received with the lived realities they experienced in getting access to and studying state actors in the migration control field. Recognising that ethical requirements vary vastly from one academic context to another (Bosa 2008), following the guidelines set by ethical committees in universities and funding agencies becomes increasingly difficult and hindering for critical anthropologists who work on politically charged issues (De Koning *et al.* 2019; see also Bouillon and Fresia 2006; Tomkinson 2014).

What is increasingly at stake, then, is the ability of critical migration scholars to preserve their intellectual autonomy, uphold their commitment to quality research and maintain their analytical independence in setting the agenda for what needs to be studied. One telling example for this regressive potentiality is that in several of our case studies, officials disputed and refused to allow us to use the term 'deportation' when



referring to what they called ‘forced removal’, ‘repatriation’ or ‘return’. As Janine Dahinden has stated, ‘migration and integration research originates in a historically institutionalised nation-state migration apparatus and is thus [...] reproducing the categories of this particular migration apparatus’ (2016: 2207). Being forced to accept the state terminology when requesting and managing access, researchers de facto compromise their own professional commitment in the field. The risk here is that researchers will increasingly become part of the means by which the migration control field reproduces its very operative logic. Critical studies will then be tagged as ‘radical’ and will be prevented from access and, possibly, even from mainstream academic publishing. Access will become the privilege of researchers who, willingly or not, adjust the terms, inquiries and methods of their projects to the whims of the agencies they seek to study.

This leads us to conclude that academics should think creatively about the ways in which they request, negotiate and achieve (or not) access. We can consider working in collaborative research teams that can then not only study the fragmented migration control field simultaneously at multiple locations but also share the burden of risk in getting access. Whatever way we choose, we should be aware that producing knowledge on ‘the state’ is also always co-constituted in our interactions with the officials we approach and engage. The production of knowledge is never ‘of’ the state but rather something that is intimately done with the state.

Acknowledgements

We are very thankful to the anonymous reviewer and all the contributors to this special issue for their comments on earlier drafts of this introduction. The articles that make up the special issue were first presented in the framework of the double panel ‘What does access do to knowledge? Challenges, consequences, and opportunities of entering the migration apparatus’ at the 14th IMISCOE Annual Conference in Rotterdam in June 2017. The research of the guest editors of this special issue was supported by the nccr – on the move funded by the Swiss National Science Foundation, as well as the research project ‘The social life of state deportation regimes: a comparative study of the implementation interface’ funded by the European Research Council (ERC-Startinggrant 336319).

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La recherche et l'accès : que nous disent les tentatives d'étudier le contrôle migratoire sur l'État?

Les contributrices et contributeurs à ce numéro thématique ont pris conscience qu'une réflexion sur nos expériences d'accès (ou non) permet d'identifier d'importantes caractéristiques des institutions que nous voulions étudier et, plus largement, sur le champ du contrôle migratoire. Autrement dit, nos tentatives d'approcher et d'approximer des acteurs étatiques au sein d'un champ sous tension nous ont exposés à certains de ses principes d'organisation les plus fondamentaux. Nous nous sommes, par conséquent, fixé pour tâche de répondre à la question suivante : que nous disent nos tentatives d'étudier le contrôle migratoire sur l'État? Notre exercice est donc clairement défini comme une tentative d'intervenir dans un débat naissant sur les moyens par lesquels « l'anthropologie de l'État » peut se développer. Tant les enjeux au cœur de nos recherches – la gestion des autres indésirables – que les terrains dans lesquels nous les menons, les administrations de contrôle migratoire, deviennent de plus en plus essentiels à la gouvernance de nos sociétés. En rassemblant les résultats de différents projets de recherche en Europe, ce numéro de *SA/AS* offre une perspective comparative sur certains des aspects les plus saillants du champ du contrôle migratoire du point de vue des chercheuses et chercheurs ethnographiques en quête d'accès.

Mots-clés obtenir l'accès, expulsion, ethnographie, études sur les migrations, Europe