



## Accessing the Migration Apparatus: An Introduction

*This is the first post of Border Criminologies' themed series on 'Accessing the Migration Apparatus' organised by Damian Rosset and Christin Achermann. The series originates from a double panel entitled 'What does access do to knowledge?' that took place during the [14th IMISCOE Annual Conference](#) in Rotterdam in June 2017.*

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### Why access the migration apparatus?

While institutions of migration control and management are increasingly sought-after research sites, they are and will remain particularly sensitive ones as they evolve in a highly politicised field. Accessing them, therefore, raises a wide spectrum of methodological, but also analytical and theoretical, questions. The papers of the themed series we are hereby introducing all deal with these challenging questions.

Drawing on the experiences of anthropologists, sociologists, and political scientists researching various institutions of migration governance (border controls, deportation regimes, immigration detention, migration courts) in a dozen European countries (and Israel), the contributors to this series reflect on the way access shapes researchers' positionality, the scientific knowledge they produce, and our understanding of the modern state. From the *Guardia Civil* in Melilla to the Finnish border guard and the Israeli immigration detention centres, the institutions to which access was sought are all constituents of what Gregory Feldman described as the [European migration apparatus](#).

The challenges associated with gaining and maintaining research access are obviously not specific to studies of migration management and control – they are omnipresent in any qualitative research and particularly salient for ethnographic work. Nevertheless, setting the focus on these institutions allows us on the one hand to put comparable experiences into perspective and, on the other hand, to point out potential rationales of governance shared and applied by political actors, policy-makers, institutions and bureaucrats at multiple levels across the 'migration apparatus'.

Like any other policy area, migration management and control can be approached in many different ways. However, in order to account for discourses or regulations, as well as for the

actual practices of individuals implementing migration policy, qualitative and ethnographic inquiry are necessary. The representations, the linguistic devices and the rationales whose interplay forms and maintains the ‘migration apparatus’ are diffuse and difficult to grasp. Ethnographic inquiry offers a particularly relevant toolkit to pinpoint these elements in the discourses and practices of institutions and the individuals within. Focusing on policy in action enables us to learn how civil servants ‘*reproduce rhetoric, sense current political leanings, and craft documents*’, Feldman [argues](#), seeing them not as ‘*incandescent sources of policy power but rather administrators of policy rationales that operate in larger, looser constellations of government agencies, NGO’s, intergovernmental organizations, and [European] institutions.*’

### **The methodological challenges associated with access**

Obtaining access to the migration apparatus is not straightforward. Permission to study can come in many forms, at different stages and to varying degrees. The primary concern, however, is to get physical access, with or without formal authorisation, to the research field – that is, to the places, spaces, individuals, and artefacts that it is made up of.

The process of negotiating access to an ethnographic research field is interactional by nature and always involves multiple subjectivities and interpretations. The roles often shift: during this process the researcher becomes the object of investigation; the explicit objectives of the research, but also the (hidden) goals and the trustworthiness of the individuals conducting it are scrutinised, interpreted and assessed. As Renato Rosaldo [puts it](#), ‘*objects of analysis are also analysing subjects who critically interrogate ethnographers – their writings, their ethics and their politics*’.

While it is important to scrutinise reluctance or resistance of field actors to grant access, it is also necessary to reflect on the reasons of successful negotiations. In all cases, access negotiations should be considered as part of the collected data and thus legitimate products of the research that contribute to making the social settings of the field intelligible. The way access is negotiated, the way it is granted – or not – and under what conditions (sites, methods, temporalities) all reveal something about the actors involved, the migration apparatus they operate in and, beyond it, the (dys)functioning and ethics of the state.

Once formal authorisation is granted questions remain. First, access negotiation is an intersubjective process during which the researcher and the field’s actors develop ideas of each other’s nature and objectives. These mutual representations endure during fieldwork and impact the positionality of researchers, as well as their relationships of trust and suspicion with the field’s actors. They generate mutual expectations regarding how the researchers and the researched will act. This includes expectations related to shared or different national or social origin, sex, political opinions, and other characteristics which can result in implicit expectations of loyalty or dissent. The multiple loyalties related to accessing the research field need to be recognised and managed.

Second, entering a community is, as Soma Chaudhuri [remarks](#), ‘*fraught with challenges created by gatekeeping*’. Access is an ongoing process and the field’s actors retain a large room for manoeuvre as to what exactly is accessed. While access is oftentimes negotiated with and granted by actors in higher positions, the actual participation and cooperation of subordinates remains to be earned. While attempting to impose their physical presence in a research field,

researchers concomitantly attempt to impose their own problematics and interpretations onto the field. Negotiating access is thus also about negotiating power relations. In this sense, gatekeeping is about resistance: by keeping (parts of) the field invisible, gatekeepers retain the monopoly of legitimate discourse over it.

Finally, just as permission to enter the field does not necessarily grant rights to data, so, too, access to data does not necessarily illuminate shared meanings of the field. Access to the field is incomplete as long as a researcher does not understand the meanings and symbolic functions the actors confer to their discourses, practices and environments, which are necessary to subtly account for the field's functioning, logics and ethics.

### **What does access say about the migration apparatus?**

So, what do the posts in this series say about accessing the migration apparatus? While focused on methodological concerns, the posts reveal important aspects about the apparatus itself. Rather than two distinct products of the same process, methodological challenges and research results often appear to be reciprocal.

The state often appears fuzzy and unreadable. The outcomes of research requests largely depend on hierarchies and power relationships that are only partly visible to the researcher. There seems to be no general recipe for how to succeed or fail in gaining access to the institutions that make up the migration apparatus. Individual gatekeepers wield considerable discretion.

One could argue that the concerns of state officials are understandable; any research subject would wish to control the results of the research and the knowledge produced. However, civil servants are not like any other actor. They represent and embody the state and, as such, their actions require legitimation. The control of representations and legitimisations reveals the nature of the state '*simultaneously as material force and as ideological construct*' to borrow Timothy Mitchell's [words](#).

The researcher emerges as a competitor of the state in the production of knowledge and narratives about it. The sensitivity of institutions of migration management as research fields may thus oftentimes be about preserving the authority of their institutional '[talk](#)' – the norms and values carried by their structures and rhetoric. Reflecting on the process of negotiating access appears particularly fruitful to grasp these ideational constructs, shared meanings, and performative discourses.

The official justifications for refusing access rarely address such issues, but are often justified by matters of resources and the specific burden on institutions that resulted from increased migratory movements between 2014 and 2015. Data protection and confidentiality was also presented as an argument to decline research requests. When access was granted, however, these issues were dealt with easily or not voiced at all.

Another repeated feature was the field actors' preference for certain research methods. While often accommodating researchers' interview requests, state institutions were repeatedly less keen to let them conduct observation in their premises. This raises the question whether this choice is based on the preference for data that can be controlled or on more practical reasons.

Either way, the knowledge that social scientists can produce is importantly impacted by the type of data they can collect.

Each of the aspects above involves ethical questions for researchers attempting to access the migration apparatus. Access is always partial, polymorphous and loaded with power relationships. It is essential that researchers recognise the ethical implications of access. Finally, while focusing on the migration apparatus, its logics and rationales, researchers should be careful not to lose sight of the people whose lives it is designed to manage and control.

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#### **How to cite this blog post (Harvard style)**

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