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Unlocking migration politics: researching beyond biases and gaps in migration studies and comparative politics

Helene Thiollet

Research in migration politics predominantly examines immigration and integration policies in Western democracies, at best widening its scientific enquiries to migration corridors that are often defined by colonial history. Just like any social science field, empirical ethnocentrism mirrors the geography of scientific employment and institutions, the economics of research funding and the politics of academic publications. Apart from raising ethical issues, these limitations constrain our understanding of processes and dynamics of international migration politics, firstly, by neglecting empirical realities that are statistically relevant – notably migration politics in the Global South – and secondly, by creating methodological and epistemological biases. Documenting less-researched cases offers an obvious remedy to the problem. Yet the future of research on migration politics is not only about more research on “non-Western others” that boxes the results in “area studies” or a “comparative” sub-field. It is about using single-case studies and comparative research across types of states and political contexts to weed out some of the most blinding assumptions of migration theories and to open up new research avenues. This could mean taking migration processes rather than political regimes, geographical location or development levels as the independent variable and constructing broad comparative frameworks where migration politics become the dependent variable. This could first be achieved by considering seemingly “most different” political contexts across countries and comparing, for instance, democratic apples and authoritarian pears. It could also be achieved by paying more attention to migration histories and tracing political processes and institutions across time and contexts with greater care. As such, a truly insurgent and disruptive comparative claim would go beyond merely including more Southern case studies into pre-existing paradigms and epistemologies of migration politics but rather expanding, amending or recasting migration theories based on the new knowledge generated.

1. Gaps and biases: research on migration politics today

Understanding migration requires looking across the various units of analysis that are traditionally distributed across academic disciplines and taking into account multiple levels of enquiry, from the most intimate to the global (see session 4 in this volume).¹ Such a complex comparative agenda across space and time necessarily involves multi-disciplinary epistemologies and methodologies. As more experienced social scientists have written, this is the main challenge for migration studies in the next decade.²

¹ Generally speaking, anthropology for individuals or artefacts, politics for states and sometimes other political units, sociology for all sizes of social groupings or social relations, human geography for spaces and places, etc.

² Adrian Favell writes that migration studies can be a “field which is uniquely well positioned to chart the landscape of a social science beyond container nation-state-societies; in which interdisciplinarity and multiple methods can be used to engineer a non-methodologically nationalist social science incorporating methods and conceptions, not only from sociology and

Although insights from anthropology and the critique of biases induced by methodological nationalism have infused a “transnational awareness” into migration studies, states are still generally studied as operators of migration outcomes and mostly considered as whole units of analysis, encompassing institutional but also cultural characteristics.³ Additionally, the citizen-migrant dichotomy still shapes academic discussions on contemporary politics, rights, memberships and identities (Anderson, 2013). The most-cited scholarship on migration politics looks at power configurations and influences within the state: state-business relations (Hollifield, 1992) or state-courts relations (Joppke, 2001) or political cultures of incorporation across states (Brubaker, 2002; Castles, 1992; Schain, 2012). Scholars hardly look beyond the usual suspects in the Global North, like the United States, Canada, Germany, Australia, the United Kingdom, the Netherlands or France, which offer the “best” opportunity for publication and to be “relevant” in the field.

When scholars step across the borders of Western-centric social sciences for single-case (Klotz, 2012; Vigneswaran, 2019) or comparative studies (Chung, 1994; Garcés-Mascareñas, 2012), they often (though not always) use Western analytical frameworks to describe the inputs, drivers, substance and effects of migration policies in the Global South. Unlike anthropologists, geographers and sociologists, political scientists rarely take cities, neighbourhoods, groups (including diasporas), regional groupings, inter-governmental or transnational institutions as units of analysis for migration politics, so these are seldom included in migration theory.

Despite an increasing wealth of research in political science as a discipline (Hollifield and Wong, 2013), the following holds: 1) migration research still generally focuses on Western case studies; 2) states are still the main unit of analysis; 3) state characteristics are still generally considered as independent variables. As such, a number of starting premises in political research have generated pervasive assumptions about migration politics across the world. These assumptions implicitly shape the field of research and migration theories, as the following table attempts to show.

political science, but just as much from geography and anthropology, as well as economics and demography.” (Favell, 2014, p. 4)

³ An open question remains about the possibility of adopting “methodological transnationalism” as the preferred lens to study migration politics, as the state remains largely the unit of analysis even when combined with international and transnational dynamics and inputs.

Table 1: Main research assumptions on migration politics (K. Natter and H. Thiollet)

Regions	Global North / more developed	Global South / developing and less developed /emerging
Type of flow	Mostly Immigration and Asylum	Mostly Emigration and Exile or Asylum
Political Regime	Democracies / liberal	Authoritarian regimes / illiberal
Political economy	Autonomy of states, markets and societal actors	Embeddedness of markets, societal actors and states (developmental states, patrimonial states etc.).
State capacity	Strong states but efficacy bounded by individual and collective rights	Weak states / Strong states debate ⁴ . Weak individual and collective rights
Policies	Mostly immigration policies Mostly efficient (but effectiveness debate)	Mostly emigration policies Non-policies / inefficient policies ⁵ / all-powerful policies
Main drivers considered	<u>Politics:</u> deliberative and interest based (lobbies, partisan politics), the rule of law (labour law, citizenship rights, asylum law, domestic courts and international organisations) <u>Economics:</u> labour market demand and supply, firms, migration industry.	<u>Economics:</u> economic development, households, patronage, recruiters, smugglers, informal migration industry <u>Formal and informal social institutions:</u> Family, kinship, companies, brokers, migrants' and refugees' networks, diasporas and transnational social groups.

Taking political regimes as independent variables not only generates normative biases on policy making and policy outcomes but also constrains research strategies by focusing scientific scrutiny on certain objects, actors and processes. In democratic settings, for instance, the key factors for migration politics are considered to be institutional or political-party bargaining, business or civil society lobbying, the impact of courts or the media, and the role played by expert knowledge; in undemocratic contexts, the key factors for migration politics are considered to be informality, criminal networks, family/patrimonial/kinship dynamics, structural economic determinants (poverty, development level), and, last but not least, international interventions (whether development, humanitarian, security/peace-related).⁶ Scholars do look into the role of courts or the media in non-democratic settings, but they are less likely look at patrimonial networks, corporative bodies or informality in shaping migration politics in democratic societies – and if they do, the analysis has a normative undertone, as a deviation from standard democratic practice.

4 In the Global South, on-going debates try to characterise strong, weak or failed states based on a definition of state robustness bounded by methodological nationalism. Authoritarian states are sometimes deemed more “efficient” and able to “do as they say/wish” while democracies are trapped in liberal paradoxes. At the same time, developing or even emerging states are often seen as weak and unable to constrain informal and formal social institutions and dynamics like kinship, big men, corruption.

5 Migration research largely underestimates the role of immigration policies in the Global South (Weiner, 1985, p. 450) sometimes even denying the very existence of such policies (Brochmann & Hammar, 1999, p. 12)

6 Expectedly, a Western centric developmental bias applies to migration politics: developing countries – even they have democratic institutions and procedures- are often not considered full-fledge liberal democracies.

2. New research venues

These assumptions generate research gaps. Less-studied countries or regions or under-researched types of flows delineate privileged *zones* of investigation to advance migration scholarship:

- Emigration politics from the Global North/ developed countries (“expatriate studies”) which are often depoliticised and analysed through a merely economic lens.
- Immigration to and integration politics in the Global South (e.g. the Gulf immigration countries)
- Immigration and integration politics in the Global South
- Emigration politics from the Global South
- Asylum politics and refugee integration in the Global South

Even if most of the blind spots are located in the Global South and thus call for more empirically-grounded research “there”, blind spots are not only “geographical” but also concern issues, institutions, processes, interactions and power relations that are not context-bound:

- *Migration policies* are rarely studied in poor non-democratic post-colonial states;
- *Immigrants’ political and social incorporation* in developing countries is hardly ever studied;
- *States’ relationships with migration industries* have been under-researched in contemporary Northern contexts. In particular, *brokers and intermediaries* are less likely to be studied in contemporary Western democratic contexts than in developing countries;
- *Studies on migration industries* have focused on illegal or informal institutions; governmental and market actors are often considered as interchangeable in patrimonial or developmental states;
- *Influence of civil society and courts* are generally disregarded as irrelevant objects of study in authoritarian context;
- *Refugees’ integration* is less likely to be studied than immigrants’ integration; *informal processes and institutions determining migrants’ integration* are less likely to be assessed than formal ones.
- Last but not least, except in critical research on economic or transit migration, refugee studies or migration crises (Andrijasevic & Anderson, 2009; Chimni, 2008; Collyer et al., 2012; Lindley, 2014), *migrants and refugees* themselves are often under-studied as political agents and subjects – notably so in authoritarian contexts.

Single and multiple-case comparisons in migration politics across time and space will not only help fill these gaps but also change our assumptions, expand existing research methods and widen the scope of migration theories.

To expand the validity of migration theories, scholars have exported and tested Western-grounded frameworks in non-Western contexts. Several authors, for instance, have expanded theoretical discussions on the making of migration policy and “migration states” (Hollifield, 2004) through empirical cases from the Global South: Audie Klotz (2013) has contributed to international relations theories of norm diffusion by looking at migration politics in South Africa; Katharina Natter (2018) has tested the effect of political systems (and not just regimes) on migration policy making in Morocco and Tunisia; and Fiona Adamson and Gerasimos Tsourapas (2019) have offered new typologies of states built from examples from the Global South. Theory testing and expansion could and should be employed “the other way around”: one example of that is the analysis of intermediation in Asia (Xiang and Lindquist, 2014) as a ground for a globally relevant theory of the migration industry and its relation to the state (Gammeltoft-Hansen & Sørensen, 2013; Surak, 2018). Political scientists have paid attention to private actors in the context of the privatisation of migration management in Europe, both legal (Lahav, 1998) and illegal (Andersson, 2014; Triandafyllidou, 2018). Political anthropologist Biao Xiang has explicitly charted an innovative theory of state/non-state relations in Asian migration politics from an ethnographic approach (2014). Similarly, “retheorising international migration from non-western experience” by grounding their insights in Singapore and other Asian cases, Brenda Yeoh and Gracia Liu-Farrer have sought to bring about original theories in migration studies on the politics of space, mobility and immobility along gender, ethnicity and class identities (2018). We can also remember that Myron Weiner’s much-cited work on migration politics and security stemmed from in-depth knowledge of the political demography of India (1978).

Building upon these experiences, I believe that comparing migration politics in immigration countries like the United States, Singapore, Russia, Canada, Saudi Arabia, Cote d’Ivoire, Qatar, or Germany could shatter our assumptions about migration policies, their *drivers* and *effectiveness* and the *strength or weakness* of states across regimes and times. Such discussions could recast analyses about “implementation gaps” by looking at both formal and informal tracks and institutions in policy making, at state and non-state actors, practices and discourses, and exploring migration governance from street-level bureaucracies to official discourses. Looking at the politics of migrant integration, asylum and refugee settlement in Kenya, Sweden, the United States, Sudan, Iran, Germany and Bangladesh could question our assumptions on the *drivers of integration* in the context of mass reception, notably assessing the impact upon integration outcomes of political and legal contexts, perceptions and statuses, and formal and informal processes of inclusion and exclusion.

In the last section, I focus on a research avenue that may prove particularly fruitful to overcoming the usual dichotomies and doing away with some of the limitations existing in migration theory.

3. Migration politics as state making

Migration is commonly seen as a challenge to sovereignty (Geddes, 2001; Guiraudon and Lahav, 2000; Sassen, 2015), a threat to national identity or state security (Adamson, 2006), or even as a life-biological threat. Emigration is also conceptualised as a threat to regimes and nation-states, a domain where the authority of states seeks to be extended often at the expense of non-state actors, as studies of diaspora politics show (Cohen, 1996; Lafleur, 2013; Mangala, 2017; Tsourapas, 2018). But apart from a few exceptions, theorists have rarely taken the critical stance seriously enough to change the premises of their research: what if “mobility makes states” rather than immobility? This argument, made by Darshan Vigneswaran and Joel Quirk (2015) based on a collection of African cases, has unfortunately remained cornered in an “area study.” That intuition, however, is globally relevant for the politics of immigration, integration and emigration alike and should be expanded. By determining international relations between states, delineating the contours of the nation, shaping state capacity and authority over “their” population at home and abroad, and organising state-societies relations, migration politics can be seen as a promising way to understanding state making

Thinking about migration politics as a determinant of state-making processes across time answers Abdelmalek Sayad’s invitation to *rethink*, *denaturalise* and *rehistoricise* the state (Sayad, 1999). Just as Charles Tilly denaturalised the history of modern state-making in Western Europe to describe it as predatory and violent, migration scholars could revisit migration politics as state-making through, on the one hand, the progressive control over people’s (im)mobility within and across borders (Torpey, 2000) and, on the other, through the policing of social interactions by hierarchical statuses, spatial segregation, and discrimination based on race, gender, status, religion, ethnicity, etc.

Firstly, *immigration makes states* through politics and processes of formal and informal incorporation or exclusion. Processes of boundary making and belonging drive the building of polities. Such a perspective obviously moves away from the idea of incorporation into pre-existing social “containers” according to pre-defined political norms regarding diversity (ethnic, multicultural, republican, etc.) and regulated by organised states. It calls for combining *governmental* and *everyday* politics in order to understand the politics of otherness (integration, exclusion) as co-producing nations. Alongside formal integration policies and labour market dynamics, the everyday politics of spatial segregation and access and political and social interactions and practices offer a bottom-up, practice-based and spatialised viewpoint on migration politics as nation builder. These are the sites where the processes of boundary making, polity building and institutionalisation of politics can be observed: ethnographers have shown, for instance, how refugee politics in Europe and elsewhere are determined between official policies and asylum laws, humanitarian interventions and the everyday politics that impact access to material and immaterial resources in migrant camps, jungles and informal urban encampments (Agier, 2011; Hilhorst & Jansen, 2010).

By way of transnational extension, the building of the nation and the state also happens “from afar” via diaspora politics. In Eritrea, in the Philippines, in Turkey, in Senegal, in India,

in China, in Algeria, as well as in France or Italy, emigration politics enforce political control over nationals abroad, extract remittances, and organise or prevent political participation through external voting (Collyer, 2014). But beyond diaspora politics, emigration and transnational dynamics also change states and change our assumptions on the *territorial dimension of state building*. Beyond the well-known case of Israel, various state-building processes (Palestine, Eritrea, Sri Lanka, Kurdistan) need to be approached through the diasporic lens. Diasporas make states; diasporas can also make, or change, political regimes. Such insights feed into scientific debates on *democratization* and transnational politics. More generally, the relationship between emigration, immigration and revolution that started to be discussed during the Arab Springs (Sigona and De Haas, 2012; Thiollet, 2013) or debates around transnational activism and external voting should be taken to the next level by using existing theories of revolution or creating new ones.

Finally, “migration as state building” as an approach is particularly relevant to conceptualising and investigating state building in settlers’ states and colonial and post-colonial contexts to complement the well-known accounts of migration politics in the United States (Zolberg, 2008), Australia and the United Kingdom (Appleyard, 1964), Canada and Germany (Triadafilopoulos, 2004) and more recently Latin America (FitzGerald & Cook-Martín, 2014). The comparative historical gaze has helped unveil the role of *brokerage* and *race* or *ethnicities* in democratic migration politics. Scholars of migration politics would benefit from building even more upon the work of global historians who have brought migration and citizenship into the analysis of state building processes in former colonies or metropolises (Al-Shehabi, 2019; Buettner, 2016; Cooper, 2014; Harper & Constantine, 2010; Mongia, 2018). As Fiona Adamson, Gerasimos Tsourapas and I have argued (2018), imperial and local politics meshed to shape exploitative and hierarchical colonial migration states in Algeria, Egypt and Saudi Arabia.

Seeing migration politics as a structuring feature of state-building processes amounts to investigating what migration does to the nature of the state, its practices and policies, to political regimes and state-society relations, therefore reversing the usual perspective on “migration control.” In this perspective, I have argued that mass immigration to the oil-producing Gulf monarchies is more than a consequence of labour market demands (Naufal, 2011)

and that immigration policies are not mechanically “determined” by oil rentierism (Shin, 2017): rather than incidental, they are constitutive of a regional social order (SaadEddin, 1982) and modern state-building processes happening in immigration and emigration states (Thiollet, forthcoming).

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