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Beyond the present, the nation, and Europe: Three different uses of history in reflexive migration studies

Christiane Reinecke [iD]¹ and Isabella Löhr [iD]²,³,*

¹Department of History, Europa-Universität Flensburg, Flensburg 24943, Germany
²Department "Globalisations in a Divided World," Leibniz Centre for Contemporary History Potsdam, Potsdam 14467, Germany
³Freie Universität Berlin, Department of History and Cultural Studies, Berlin 14195, Germany
*Corresponding author. Leibniz Centre for Contemporary History Potsdam / Freie Universität Berlin, Berlin, Germany. Email: isabella.loehr@zzf-potsdam.de

Abstract

Interdisciplinary migration research is currently witnessing an increased interest in the impact of colonialism, decolonization, and expertization on present-day integrationism and racism. Tracing the genealogy of current ways of framing, categorizing, and governing groups viewed as "migrant Others" forms part of a reflexive research agenda that analyses migration as a product of changing constellations and categorizations. The article takes up this interest in the recent (and sometimes less recent) past in migration research. Bringing this interdisciplinary body of work into conversation with historical scholarship, we discuss how migration scholars make use of historical genealogies and we identify three different ways of relating the past to the present in debates about current migration and border regimes: We distinguish between what we term an anthropological "deep history" mode, a "genealogical" mode, and a "contrapuntal" or "disruptive" mode. This article argues for a careful, reflexive use of the past. We contend that both the alterity of past discourses and practices and their persistence and lasting impact can help us better make sense of the present in critical migration research.

Keywords: reflexive migration research; global history; colonialism; decolonization; racism; Eurocentrism

1. Introduction

This is, it seems, an auspicious time for historians interested in migration and in knowledge about migration, given the remarkable interest that migration researchers are currently showing in the genealogy of current ways of framing, categorizing, and governing groups viewed as "migrant Others." Scholars aiming to critically reflect on the strong policy orientation of migration research, or on the categories, data, and narratives employed in different migration and border regimes, often turn to the recent (and in some cases less recent) past in order to make sense of how we got to where we are now. This current interdisciplinary interest in the impact of colonialism, decolonization, and expertization on present-day integrationism and racism might almost be described as a "historical turn" in migration studies.

As two historians who have been working in the emergent field of reflexive migration research for some time now, we are delighted at this burgeoning interest in the past—particularly as it strengthens the interdisciplinary nature of migration research, which has long

profited from the interplay of methods, concepts, and perspectives stemming from different fields. At the same time, we are astonished to notice the marginal role that historians and historical scholarship play in this re-evaluation of disciplinary perspectives. In itself, this marginal role is hardly problematic. However, as a growing number of scholars call for a critical self-inspection of the "doing" of migration research, the various ways in which migration scholars refer to the impact of past discourses and structures on the present deserve a closer look. This article therefore discusses how migration scholars have recently been making use of historical genealogies and references to the past. We identify different modes of using history and of relating the past to the present in debates about current migration and border regimes. Moreover, we argue for a more conscious distinction between different forms of referring to the past in migration research and contend that both the alterity of past discourses and their persistence and lasting impact can help us better make sense of the present. Using history as a critical lens, the article thus addresses one of the main concerns of this Special Issue which is the much-needed theoretical rethinking of migration-related research with the aim to overcome dominant integrationist, migranticizing, and nation-centered paradigms (Dodevska and Nimer in this Special Issue).

This agenda is reflexive in the best sense of the word. It aligns with the increased "reflexive" interest of migration scholars in the knowledge, terms, data, and categories to which politicians, officials, activists and scholars refer in order to govern and make sense of migration and diversity (Boswell 2009; Nieswand and Drotbohm 2014; Laurens 2017). For some time now, social scientists have been increasingly attentive toward the influence of academic knowledge on politics, economics, and society—and vice versa (Felt 2017; Stehr 2018). Inspired by debates in science and technology studies, and in the sociology and history of knowledge, sociologists, anthropologists, and historians alike have begun to enter data centers, statistical offices, and research institutes in order to learn more about the production of knowledge and its (social, cultural, and political) effects. This interdisciplinary turn to the production of social knowledge and expertise has resulted in numerous studies. This body of work explores the categorization and datafication of societies, investigates the production of census data, and sheds light on the "trust in numbers" that came to characterize the practice of experts, politicians, and administrators both in the past and in the present, and in different national and imperial settings (Sarasin 2011; Lässig and Steinberg 2017; Fassin and Steinmetz 2023; Glasman and Lawson 2023).

These approaches have found a productive resonance in migration research. Migration scholars are increasingly directing their attention to the discourses and practices that constitute migration as a "social fact." They perceive migration not as a self-evident, given object of analysis, but as a product of changing constellations and categorizations that are themselves used to allocate resources and reorder socio-political hierarchies. Central to this shift in perspective is the premise that what is understood and experienced as "migration" in a society is highly dependent on knowledge and meaning and thus contingent (Espahangizi 2022). What is understood and experienced as "migration" depends on economic conditions as well as on changing "migration" and "border regimes"[1] and on the very knowledge orders that inform the governing of migration. To achieve a reflexive perspective, scholars are thus investigating the categories used to make sense of and deal with migration and different mobilities. Pointing to the often close relationship between (restrictive) migration regimes, a nationalist framing of society, and knowledge production about migration, these scholars suggest critically re-evaluating (and partly doing away with) central categories of migration research (Dahinden 2016).

Furthermore, this new interest in knowledge about migration is driven by an uneasiness regarding the traditionally strong policy orientation of migration research, as also discussed by Iva Dodevska in this Special Issue who looks at how migration researchers are co-opted into migration governance processes at the EU-level and help to legitimize integrationist discourses as part of an "evidence-based policy" paradigm (Dodevska in this Special

Issue). This concern with the policy orientation of the field was sparked by its rapid expansion in the aftermath of the so-called "refugee crisis" of 2015, when state bureaucracies and political actors, the media and the public showed an increased demand for academic knowledge and for more data about migration. As a consequence, new data centers and think tanks have been established, and third-party funding for migration- and refugee-related research projects has increased significantly (Braun et al. 2018: 10; Kleist 2018: 37; Stielike 2022). Some have embraced this development both as a long overdue appreciation of research activities and a welcome response to the constant appeals to acknowledge the role migration plays in the composition of contemporary societies; others have expressed their discomfort. The latter group fear that the intellectual independence of the profession might be threatened or at least drawn into political struggles over the drafting of migration and border policies, as data on migration is used as an instrument of (restrictive) migration and border policies. In addition, there is a growing concern about the asymmetries that structure migration research as a field. Scholars are becoming increasingly aware that the questions of who speaks in globalized migration research, of who is doing research on whom, and of how research from the Global North relates to that from (and about) the Global South, are important. In this Special Issue, both Yukseker and Çeler and Nimer and Osseiran point to a North-South hierarchization of knowledge by investigating how loaded analytical concepts and policy frames travel from Europe to the Global South (Yukseker and Çeler 2024; Nimer and Osseiran forthcoming). That such hierarchizations come with historical baggage is demonstrated by van Reekum and Schinkel who, in their contribution, trace the genealogy of the dominant conception of "migration," "inclusion," and "exclusion" and show how this conception is deeply intertwined with the "racial institution of the global" (van Rekum and Schinkel forthcoming).

More and more migration researchers are therefore concerned with the ways in which the historical development, the political interconnectedness, and the material conditions of the field of migration research affect the categories and assumptions with which they operate (e.g., Mecheril et al. 2013; Römhild 2014; Dahinden 2016; Amelina 2021; Löhr 2022). They are thus turning their attention to the discourses, technologies, data practices, and categorizations that constitute migration as a "social fact" (Schrover and Molony 2013; Supik 2014; Zloch, Müller, and Lässig 2018; Horvath 2019; Grommé and Scheel 2020; Ruppert and Scheel 2021; Stielike 2022; Bartels et al. 2023).

This article contributes to the "reflexive turn" in migration studies by arguing that these discussions would profit from a more conscious use of both history and historical scholarship. We argue for a careful, reflexive use of the past in discussions on knowledge and migration. This kind of reflexive deployment of the past would take into account that each reference to the past is itself situated and contains implicit assumptions. The first section of this article will therefore elaborate on two different modes of referring to the past that constitute the core of how migration researchers are currently attempting to embed their analysis of contemporary hegemonic migration and border regimes into historical narratives. The second section of our article takes as its starting point current historiographical debates on "presentism." Here we suggest a third mode of connecting the present with the past, one which we consider particularly fruitful for a reflexive research agenda that intends both to recognize its own positionality and to contribute to a deeper understanding of the complexities and contingencies of current migration regimes. In the final section we discuss the analytical uses of such a "contrapuntal" or "disruptive" history mode in migration research. To this end, we delve into the rich literature that historians critical of a too nation-centered history have produced in recent decades to exemplify (1) how past ways of producing legal and political categories of belonging have been the subject of contested negotiations, (2) how past resistances and subaltern mobilities can broaden our understanding not just of how hegemonies come into being, but also of how they become

unstable, and (3) how past ways of conceptualizing the relationship between territory, state, and society may help us to avoid methodological nationalism and epistemic Eurocentrism.

We are convinced that a deeper understanding of both the alterity of past hegemonies and of the continuing effects of colonial, civilizational, and exclusionary legacies can enrich migration scholars' endeavors to understand contemporary border and migration regimes. Ultimately, such an understanding not only broadens the scope for an interdisciplinary dialogue, but can also make a substantial contribution to developing the reflexive perspective even further.

2. The many presents of the past or: Different history modes in migration studies

In the following, we discuss in a more theoretical manner what role references to the past can play in critical analyses of the present. Before we do so, however, we would like to begin by making sense of the different uses of history in interdisciplinary migration studies so far.

There are, broadly speaking, two dominant modes of referring to the past in migration studies. For the sake of clarity, we will call the first one "anthropological" and the second one "genealogical." The first one emphasizes the "alwaysness" or "unending now" of migration by pointing out that humankind has always been mobile and thus defined by migration. In this view, migratory movements are "a thread running through the full extent of our history as a species" (Manning 2003: Preface). Humans are depicted as a "migratory species" (Massey 1998: 1) and mobility and migration are presented as anthropological constants (Hoerder 2002; Lucassen, Lucassen, and Manning 2010).[2]

The anthropological or "deep history" mode began to gain importance in the late 1990s and has contributed to a normalizing view on migration not as an exception, but as "a basic condition of human societies" (Hoerder 2002: xix). Moreover, migration narratives in deep history mode—which are often linked to large-scale (regional or worldwide) analyses—tend to evade the pitfalls of methodological nationalism by focusing on times and geographies before and beyond the nation-state. Rather than taking nation-state-based policies and perspectives on migration as a norm, these narratives present this period as a phase in a much longer history of changing relations between human communities and migration.

The deep history perspective on migration thus helps to destabilize an assumption that gained in importance over the course of the 19th century and became deeply intertwined with both colonial projects and nationalist discourses, as nations tended to imagine themselves as stable, bounded entities that have always been there (Osterhammel 2014). Such a perspective also helps to uncover the traces of a homogenizing, ethnicizing nationalism that gained influence in the 19th century and continued to influence how (Western) European societies framed themselves as immigrant-receiving societies in the second half of the 20th century. The anthropological perspective exposes as unhistorical the still influential differentiation between, on the one hand, (European) immigration-receiving societies, which are seen as having always been ethnically homogeneous and stable, and, on the other hand, migrants who are framed as exceptionally or problematically mobile: What is imagined and normalized as "always already there" has itself always been shaped by migration.

The second history mode common in current migration research, the genealogical approach, seeks to uncover how the present has become what it is and contends that continuities and historical path dependencies help to explain the now. It is often inspired by postcolonial theory and by notions of a "history of the present" in the Foucauldian sense, and thus by a critical thrust that aims to deconstruct, denaturalize, and relativize current framings or problematizations. A significant portion of the scholarship currently emerging

under the heading of "reflexive" or "critical migration studies" either bears traces of such a genealogical commitment or is fully dedicated to the endeavor of decentering hegemonic discourses and categorizations concerning migration and diversity by analyzing how they became influential, often at the intersection of social scientific expertise and national or international politics.

In their—by now quite extensive—critique of integrationist paradigms and policies, migration scholars thus problematize the exclusionary and sometimes racializing dynamic of distinguishing between, on the one hand, a supposedly stable and homogeneous "nation-state society," and on the other hand, groups that are integrated, are meant to be integrated, or are considered incapable of integration. In addition, these scholars point to the postcolonial history of this distinction and of the essentialist understanding of ethnic, racial or cultural differences that feeds it. Scholars have described the production of normative integrationist knowledge in its various variants for different Western European societies such as Germany, Britain, France, the Netherlands, and Switzerland, and for different levels and contexts, from citizenship to educational policies, and from national to municipal bodies and their commissioning of data (Weil 2004; Spire 2005; Nieswand and Drotbohm 2014; Dahinden 2016; Korteweg 2017; Schinkel 2017; Möhring 2018; Espahangizi 2022; Favell 2022). They usually present the second half of the 20th century, and the time from the 1970s onwards, as the time at which the current integrationism originated.

These findings are supported by recent historical studies that also show how numerous Western European societies, including France and West Germany, were slow to abandon their dominant self-image as ethnically homogeneous societies (Alexopoulou 2020; Reinecke 2021). They only began to conceive of themselves as ethnically, culturally or racially diverse "immigrant countries" in the late 20th century, and when they did, the new self-descriptions as multicultural, diverse, cosmopolitan, or post-migratory tended to be porous and instable (Chin 2017). Although cross-border movements were indeed normal throughout the 20th century, migration was only described as an inherent element of these societies at a comparatively late stage—to the point that the term "migration," as a kind of "umbrella term" for various mobilities in many societies, only came into use in the 1980s (Espahangizi 2022).

The genealogical perspective on the production of knowledge about integration and migration has thus helped to decenter integrationist discourses that hierarchize different mobilities, ethnicities, and religiosities, depicting some as migrant Others and some as seemingly normal and self-evidently belonging, from frequent-flyer businessmen to "expatriates" (Green 2009; Kunz 2019). This approach has also helped to uncover what remains "unmarked" in integration debates and thus to deconstruct normalizing notions of society, Europeanness and whiteness.

Recently, this critical perspective has been significantly enriched by studies that focus on the coloniality of categorizations and of the power relations that nurture them (and vice versa). Inspired by ongoing debates about postcolonialism, decolonization, and decoloniality, a growing number of migrant researchers are thus beginning to criticize, deconstruct, and decenter Western politics and discourses concerning immigration and diversity by pointing to their colonial pasts (Schinkel 2017; El-Enany 2020; Boatcă 2021; Mayblin and Turner 2021; Santos 2021; Favell 2022). For the most part, this growing interest in coloniality comes with an emphasis not so much on change as on persistence and continuity; it comes with an insistence on the longevity of oppressive conditions, hegemonial discourses, power relations, and racialist discourses and structures; the colonial past is referred to as the prehistory of current problems.

In their book on "Migration Studies and Colonialism," for example, the sociologist Lucy Mayblin and the political scientist Joe Turner aim to show how the historical setting of colonialism impacted the Eurocentrism of current migration studies and the violent exclusivity of the Global North's migration regimes. Basing their book on the premise that

"colonial histories should be central to migration studies" (Mayblin and Turner 2021: 2), Mayblin and Turner refer to a number of ways in which current racial hierarchies and racializations of people and mobilities, as well as current border and migration policies, are shaped by interconnected colonial formations.

In close conversation with postcolonial literature and decolonial scholars such as G.K. Bhambra and W. Mignolo, Mayblin and Turner highlight the epistemic violence that was central to Europe's empires. They show how the development of migration research and thus of the production of knowledge about migration has been and still is intertwined with Eurocentric notions of progress, modernity, and superiority that are in turn inseparable from the history of colonialism and thus of an assumed superiority of "the West" over "the rest," including the West's privilege to observe, generalize, objectify, and define. Taking up decolonial scholars' emphasis on the "centrality of knowledge to systems of colonialism," the two authors refer to the colonial history of racisms today. They stress that "race" became a "global system of categorization" (Mayblin and Turner 2021: 55) through colonialism, and they relate this colonial system to (current) racialized structures and to a Eurocentrism that posits a (modern, civilized, rational, progressive, and objective) West against the (traditional, archaic) rest. As participants in the emerging research debate on the need to decolonize both academia and the knowledge produced by the social sciences, both authors make a strong case for the way in which migration studies should take note of the continuities of colonialism and of their impact on the imaginaries that drive current migration policies and epistemologies.

From a historian's perspective, this debate is long overdue. However, when it comes to the various uses of the past in current interdisciplinary research on colonialism, decoloniality, and postcolonialism, there is something that could be termed the problem of the "in-between." In many analyses, the emphasis on coloniality is an emphasis on the significance of *continuities*. And more often than not, it is an emphasis that draws a direct line between a colonial past, roughly situated in the 16th to 19th centuries, and the now. When pointing to the history of the racialized control of movement and of the creation of borders, Mayblin and Turner draw on examples from the slave trade and from processes of "colonial bordering" in the long 19th century (Mayblin and Turner 2021: 70), yet they hardly refer to policies or practices introduced after formal decolonization. This makes sense insofar as their analytical aim is to emphasize the continuities of colonialism.

Nevertheless, such a favoring of linearities and continuities risks leaving some of the complexities, ruptures, and contradictions of historical change unexamined. This begins with the agency of anticolonial and antiracist activists and extends to the complex interweaving of colonial heritages with the new divisions of a global Cold War world that came with shifting hegemonies; such intricacies need to be taken into account in order to make sense of current ways of talking about and managing migration (Oostindie 2011; Bailkin 2012; Lyons 2013; Perry 2018; Stokes 2022; Schenck 2023). When considering the now rich historical literature on the history of postcolonial migration in the period of formal decolonization in the second half of the 20th century, the analytical leap from a (more or less) distant colonial past to the present has its shortcomings. This is not because current racialized hierarchies, global inequalities, and immobilities cannot be considered the late heirs of colonial structures and Europe's colonial empires; it is because an overemphasis on continuities risks glossing over the complexity of historical transformations.

As the rich historical scholarship on postcolonial migration suggests, the line leading from the colonial past to the neo-colonial now is hardly direct; it comes with its own ruptures, categorizations, and asymmetries. Current historical scholarship suggests that the period from the 1940s up to the late 1970s is of particular importance when it comes to the concrete form that current racialized citizenship and immigration policies take in former European metropolitan societies (Chin 2009; Nasiali 2016; Buettner 2018; Eldridge, Kalter, and Taylor 2022; Kalter 2022). During this period, colonial legacies became

interwoven with a number of new developments, from a changed internationalism to the growing impact of human rights discourses and liberal scripts on globalized policies and discourses. For, as Adrian Favell rightly contends in his new study on the "integration nation," the post-war period was accompanied by a "momentous historical rethinking of nationhood from boundless global empire to bounded European nation-state" (Favell 2022: 29).

In short, the structures and mindsets that contribute to today's "global mobility divide" (Mau et al. 2015; Mau 2023), as well as the categories, data, and knowledges that are used to make sense of and govern migration today, are not always direct descendants of the imperial world that was still intact in the early 20th century. Rather, they can be considered adapted and transformed versions of knowledges and practices that have been translated from different historical and local contexts to others as they have travelled through space and time. In the field of critical migration studies, we should take such adaptations and translations into account, because they help us to make sense of the fundamental adaptability of hegemonic knowledges and structures to new circumstances and contexts.

The "in-between" is thus essential for making sense of racism's remarkable ability to adjust to new historical circumstances (Seth 2020) and of the "post-racist" imaginary (Schinkel 2017: 115) that many political actors in Western European countries upheld after the end of World War II. Historically speaking, racism has indeed "always proven adaptive to new circumstances" (Schinkel 2017: 137), and recent scholarship from global historians as well as from historians interested in the aftermath of National Socialism help us to make sense of this adaptability and transferability of "racial knowledge" (Fehrenbach 2005; Chin 2009; El-Tayeb 2015; Foroutan and Tanner 2018; Alexopoulou 2019; Reinecke 2021).

In any case, current attempts to make sense of present migratory movements and of the epistemologies in which they are grounded often consist in tracing the genealogy of how the present has "become." However, as we argue in the following, there are other ways of linking the past to the present for the purpose of critical research.

3. Disruptive pasts and winding paths to the present

In the following, we present a third mode of referring to the past that might serve this purpose, even if migration scholars are mainly interested in the present. This "contrapuntal" or "disruptive" history mode can help us to understand the contingency of present migration policies and to grasp the complex interplay of different layers of agency. To this end, we begin by addressing current historiographical debates on "presentism" in order to then briefly outline this third mode of "using" the past in interdisciplinary migration studies.

Making sense of the relation between the past and the present tends to be a central aspect of historians' theoretical reflections on their own discipline and disciplinary tools. That the "doing of history" is always rooted in the present is a truism in this context and one of the central pillars of history teaching. It might therefore come as a surprise that the discipline is currently embroiled in a rather heated debate about what has been termed "presentism" (Rubin 2017; Hunt 2022; Sweet 2022; Armitage 2023; Traverso 2023). Up to a certain point, this is a politicized debate that revolves around loaded terms such as "identity politics" and reflects broader political and cultural polarizations. At the same time, the disputes concerning "presentism" go hand in hand with critical reflection on the relationship between current positionalities and the narrativization of the past, and thus with reflections that are relevant to our argument here.

More often than not, historians use the term "presentism" with a polemical undertone: a politically charged term, it implies a critique of historians who are said to be so driven by present political agendas, identities, and positionalities that they ignore the different logics of past times, past societies, and past ways of thinking (Sweet 2022). Such a critique is part of a recurrent warning in historians' circles that history should not be defined solely by

present political concerns and that historical knowledge should be more than merely a tool to explain the present. Others, however, rightly emphasize that history writing has always been political and presentist in one way or another; because the "doing" of history is rooted in the present, historians cannot help but ask questions and find arguments that are intertwined with their own positionalities, values, and presents. Among those holding the latter view is the historian David Armitage who, in his defense of presentism, encourages his readers to "embrace presentism" in order to align present concerns, past dependencies, and the task of drafting visions for the future (Armitage 2023: 21). For him this comprises (1) reflecting more on the "ontological status of the past" (Armitage 2023: 70), (2) doing epistemological justice to the inevitability of looking at the past through the eyes of the present, and (3) ethically doing justice to both the living and the dead.

We propose adopting this approach, as it strikes us as particularly valuable for interdisciplinary engagements with the relationship between the past and the present. We thus suggest accepting and embracing the impact of present concerns and positionalities on narratives about history while remaining aware of the implications of the particular way in which we relate the past to the present. In migration studies, as outlined above, the "anthropological" and the "genealogical" modes of history are two important and influential ways of referring to the past in order to criticize the present. Yet we should be aware that these modes, like all history modes, are at once productive and blind: they bring certain processes into view and lead us to neglect others.

As much as genealogies and the emphasis on continuities can help to uncover hegemonic imaginaries and structures, the interest in ruptures and discontinuities, too, can help us to understand that the current world and current ways of thinking and doing are to a certain extent contingent—and thus malleable. This insight has far-reaching consequences for how we use the past to explain present migration policies and migratory movements. If we acknowledge the contingency and relative openness of the past and thus abstain from denying historical actors their (by now past) future (Leonhard 2023), it reminds us of the very fact that past and present hegemonies always result from particular historical settings in which they have been produced by people, institutions, and the then dominant governmentalities and imaginaries. This attention to the "making" of migration regimes, to the situatedness of knowledges, and to the context-specific nature of national, exclusionary imaginaries does not only advance our understanding of the mechanisms of present migration and border regimes and the inequalities inherent in them; it also brings a central concern of historical research into line with reflexive migration research, namely that the knowledge we produce does not reflect a given, pre-dated "reality," just as little as it "processes" a pre-existing historical past. Instead, the (historical) knowledge we produce depends on the lenses (categories, questions, assumptions, and certainties) that we choose or that tacitly, maybe unknowingly, guide our research.

Epistemologically speaking, the past bears the potential to point to blind spots of the now, to underline ruptures instead of linearities. This is why using a "contrapuntal" or "disruptive" history mode allows researchers to avoid reproducing existing power relations and discourses and thus to cope productively with the central concern of reflexive migration research. Moreover, the third history mode entails, up to a certain point, an "utopian" moment by helping us understand the promise of change, which comprises both the malleability of historical processes and a deeper understanding of the fundamental fact that the present does not have to be what it is.

4. Past alternatives? On the analytical uses of the alterity of past constellations

If reflexive migration research turns to the past, it might also turn to those pasts that do not directly lead to the now, but away from it. This "contrapuntal" or "disruptive history

mode" attends, for example, to the agencies, resistances, and subaltern mobilities of histor-
ical actors who were working against, undermining, or subverting the hegemonic. Or, by
referring to a more distant past that was not yet structured by nation-state territorialities
but adhered to different power logics, it might help us to distance ourselves from still per-
sistent structures and discourses and to avoid reproducing them.

In the following, we take recent (post)imperial, international, and global history litera-
ture as a starting point to elaborate on how a "disruptive" or "contrapuntal" perspective
can enrich reflexive migration research and enable us to better understand current ways of
hierarchizing mobilities and of regulating access to mobility rights in the national,
European, or international sphere.

These fields of research have witnessed remarkable growth during the last two decades
or so, as scholars have become increasingly interested in telling histories that unfold be-
yond the nation and as they have become more and more aware of the importance of
border-crossing connections between individuals, groups, and societies and of the way in
which historical actors' awareness of acting in a potentially globalized world affected their
perceptions and practices. As these studies have been conducted by a great number of
researchers from different fields and with different epochal emphases and thematic foci, the
concepts, theories, and approaches employed to decenter "the nation-state as container" as
prime object of historical research have become more differentiated. Now we encounter a
variety of labels that attempt to grasp border-crossing connections either as global, transre-
gional, transnational, translocal, or transcultural (Middell 2018: 3–8). Despite this plural-
ity, these approaches share a common concern, engaging in a firm critique of
methodological nationalism and Eurocentrism, and showing a special interest in the world
views of historical actors as well as the historical genealogy and effects of categorizations
and powerful distinctions such as the one between the "civilized," "progressive," and
"modern," and the "wild,, "backward" and "traditional."

These approaches can help us make sense of the fact that even dominant and supposedly
immovable power constellations evolved at specific points in time and are thus the result of
highly context-dependent circumstances that became abstract, unidirectional, or universal
only at a later stage. With a focus on the "long nineteenth century," extending from the
French Revolution to the end of the First World War, global and (post)imperial history in
particular has provided fruitful insights into the emergence of colonialism and the racial-
ized, hierarchical, and violent mindsets associated with it, and into the formation of nation-
hood, citizenship, and statehood as the most important constituents of the modern world.
This scholarship is particularly interesting for us with regard to the role it ascribes to cross-
border mobilities and subaltern agency. Many studies focus on the fragility of global
connections and dynamics of disruption and argue that "ethno-national resistances to glob-
alization" in particular regions can be read as reactions to the impact of processes that
took shape elsewhere on the globe (Ayden 2007; Osterhammel 2014; Drayton and
Motadel 2018: 2).[3] At the same time, this literature has drawn attention to the role played
by allegedly marginal groups or non-privileged actors such as workers, migrants and per-
sons who are often overlooked and who constantly travelled between national societies
played in globalization process, forging long-term connections between distant places (e.g.,
McKeown 2008; van der Linden 2008; Balachandran 2012; Amrith 2013; Huber 2013;
Löhr 2013).

When it comes to reflexive migration research, these approaches can teach us to appreci-
ate the extent to which the study of the not-so-straightforward past may enrich our under-
standing of the malleability of the present. To substantiate this argument, we will present
three case studies: first, on the crafting of politico-legal categories of (non-)belonging; sec-
ond, on the paradoxical connection between anti-colonial activism and the global triumph
of the nation-state as the now dominant form of socio-spatial organization; and third, on
the flexibility of the territorialization of declining imperial power.

The definition and impact of categories and categorizations that governments, international organizations, scholars and activists alike use to explain, delegitimize or enable the movement of people across national borders are at the center of reflexive migration research and its endeavor to critically reflect upon the epistemic and practical consequences of the categorical ordering of people (Brubaker 2013). Interestingly, principal categories such as citizenship, subjecthood, or territoriality appear today to be given quantities, with only the concrete procedures of sorting people in or out remaining worthy of discussion. However, a look at the early history of modern statehood reveals the initially contested nature of these categories and the stunning helplessness of state actors to define and formalize what we nowadays perceive as the essential act of state sovereignty, namely defining who is a citizen and who is an alien.

We find an intriguing example of this and its far-reaching consequences for how scholars contextualize dominant, purportedly universal categories in the historian Jan C. Jansen's meticulous study about a five-year-long court case over subjecthood and sovereignty in the British Empire in the 1820s (Jansen 2022). The case is quickly told: In 1823, the governor of then British Jamaica expelled three free men of color due to accusations that they were "dangerous aliens"—a characterization that expressed fears that the three might have been responsible for organizing slave uprisings. The deportation as such was nothing sensational at the time given that, since 1803, Jamaica had expelled several thousand aliens deemed dangerous for the social and political order of the island (Jansen 2022: 208). The case became an "empire-wide cause célèbre" (Jansen 2022: 190) because of the three men's continuous efforts to bring the case before the British government, the courts in London, and the British public. They ultimately succeeded: In 1828, the British government acknowledged that their deportation had not been lawful.

The case became explosive because the parties involved—the three plaintiffs, the Jamaican and the British government, British judges, and legal experts—needed to answer two core questions: what differentiated a British subject from an alien, and, secondly, where did the sovereign rule of a territory begin, and where did it end? As odd as these questions may appear to observers living in the 21st century, they are revealing in two respects. The first concerns the historical contexts in which the case was situated. The period of the Atlantic revolutions that shook the region between the two Americas and Europe between the 1770s and the 1830s witnessed the emergence of mass movements of refugees due to imperial, inter-imperial, and political upheavals as well as forced labor migration and slavery. As Jansen notes, the period not only saw more than a quarter of a million people on the move, but also prompted contemporaries to note that the emergence of new concepts of citizenship and sovereignty was obviously and inextricably connected with the creation of refugees and forced migration (Jansen 2022: 191).

The second relevant aspect pertains to questions of political membership. In this situation of imperial competition, the revolutionary emergence of new nation-states, and the mass movements of politically "non-trustworthy" people, the terms of political participation became contested. Particularly important for our context is the use of citizenship law as an instrument of migration control in an imperial setting that was based on a racialized differentiation between subjects, residents, and slaves, but was incapable of documenting and tracing the lives of imperial subjects. While some scholars argue that there was an opposition between premodern monarchical subjecthood and modern citizenship laws that came into being with the French Revolution, this case demonstrates the slow, clumsy, and non-directional way in which concepts of modern citizenship emerged over time. This process was set in motion by political turmoil and the accompanying need to define belonging more precisely. Prior to this, belonging was negotiated locally in a "variegated space of subjecthood" (Jansen 2022: 217) and characterized by a high degree of "indeterminacy" (Jansen 2022: 220), by the performance of everyday practices (e.g., by displaying respectability), and by differing local laws and rules that did not bother about consistency.

Against this background, the case provoked fierce debate on the precedence of legislative over executive power and thus touched upon fundamental questions of the organization of state and democracy. The ultimate ruling that granted imperial subjecthood to the three men was a landmark one as it established a legal interpretation of sovereignty and belonging that created a "blueprint" (Jansen 2022: 230) for claims to subjecthood and citizenship across the empire.

Thinking about the history of these multidirectional practices of categorizing people provides insights for reflexive migration research. It enables us to understand the historicity of processes over the course of which the core categories of the modern nation-state—territoriality, sovereignty and citizenship—have been stabilized or destabilized. It also directs our attention to the very act of creating categories and reminds us of the complexity and contingency of such processes that usually appear intentional only in retrospect. As this case demonstrates, carving a path out of a constellation without precedent and characterized by opposing interests, inconsistent laws, racialized hierarchies, differing layers of agency, and a continuous redefinition of imperial boundaries and territorial belonging, posed a challenge that could well push contemporaries to their limits. Moreover, it is important to keep in mind that neither the final ruling, that the deportation had been illegal, nor the subsequent consequences had been apparent from the beginning or materialized in the way officials had hoped.

This case brings to the fore the agency of subaltern historical actors who successfully contested their deprivation of rights and thus contributed to a reworking of the terms of political membership, resulting in a consolidation of alien law and rules of sovereignty in the British Empire. Global historians have pointed to the ways in which purportedly marginalized individuals acquired agency and navigated declining imperial rule, administrative loopholes and indeterminacies with regard to citizenship in order to emancipate themselves or to overthrow imperial rule (Burton and Ballantyne 2016). At the heart of this scholarship is anti-colonial activism between the 1880s and the 1960s. These studies have provided important impetus regarding how to make visible and give a voice to subaltern actors and how this transforms historical accounts on colonialism and imperialism (Brückenhaus 2020). To be sure, this literature does not present heroic stories of a successful and lasting overriding of racializing and deliberately disadvantaging (post-)colonial rule. Nevertheless, it assigns subaltern groups a place in history and grants them agency in that it gives a detailed account of how they challenged and thus transformed imperial rule. Moreover, these studies help to explain the simultaneity of decolonization in all parts of the world—a simultaneity which is non-intuitive given that the (violent) transformation of former colonial territories into independent nation-states only appeared as an option at a fairly late stage (Cooper 2014).

Here again, a "contrapuntal" perspective on the period of decolonization and its immediate prehistory enables us to embrace the malleability of both past and present ways of doing and thinking. It does so by investigating the scope of action of colonial subjects and by exploring in detail how their internationalized struggle for liberation interacted with imperial rule and could create unforeseen dynamics. Migration, the ability to travel and to join forces with anti-imperialist activities in other parts of the world was a central pillar of the global formation of anti-imperial networks: it enabled the creation of (institutional) platforms and a shared language (Louro 2018) and the use of the colonial metropoles for a globally organized anti-imperialism, as Goebel (2015) and (Matera, 2015) have argued.

How a "disruptive" or "contrapuntal" reference to the past can also enable scholars to avoid the analytical traps of Eurocentrism and methodological nationalism is shown by a study on the relationship between Algeria, France and the nascent European Economic Community (EEC) that deals with Algeria's formal membership in the EEC between 1957 and 1976. Megan Brown frames this story as one "of futures that were not realized and possibilities that were abandoned," but which, if realized, would have offered the

possibility of "a fundamentally different way of organizing the world" (Brown 2022: 19f). The little-known fact that Algeria was a founding member of the EEC stemmed from France's attempts to stabilize its imperial rule over Algerian territory (threatened as it was by decolonization struggles). One aspect of this was to permanently re-enact the French claim of territorial unity between France and Algeria (Shepard 2008). Doing this by inscribing Algeria into the Treaty of Rome constituted a powerful act to legitimize the imperial status quo by means of international law—with concrete consequences for migrants from Algeria to Europe, who received rights beyond the binary of citizens or imperial subjects.

Brown describes the 20 years of Algeria's membership in the EEC, which did not immediately end with Algeria's independence in 1962, as "a history of multiscalar sovereignty" (Brown 2022: 7). She reads sovereignty as a strategic resource that the French government used to cement its claim to power and imperial rule in Algeria by writing its territory into the fabric of the newly emerging European institutions. This strategy calls into question several assumptions that align with the agenda of reflexive migration research.

First, Brown's assessment critiques the territorialization of nation, identity, and society and the resulting dominance of the modern nation-state as the analytical frame of reference which has dominated post-war social sciences for so long (Malkki 1992; Wimmer and Glick Schiller 2002). Algeria's disruptive membership in the EEC thus invites us to rethink sovereignty and territory as flexible categories that policy-makers and others have used in the past to make claims and to secure (or contest) hegemonic power. The quality of excavating such a "disruptive" history lies in the fact that it enriches our imaginaries as researchers and inspires us to search for past or present constellations that are puzzling and thus enable us to truly transcend the boundaries of territorialized research agendas. Moreover, a North African perspective on the early history of European integration emphasizes the need for multi-sited and multi-sided analyses.

Second, the fact that the history of Algeria's membership in the EEC has been "erased from memory" (Brown 2022: 16) brings the pitfalls of the researcher's dependence on her sources to the fore. It reveals the degree to which the history of European integration has followed the self-narrations of the European founding fathers instead of drawing on the historicity of the integration process itself. This means that scholars have until recently perpetuated—whether consciously or not—post-war attempts to write the colonial past out of the European present and to silence its imperial heritage (Kalter and Rempe 2011), and are only now beginning to tackle the EU's imperial past, nearly half a century after formal decolonization (Hansen and Jonsson 2014; Pasture 2018).

Third, the case reminds us of the negotiability not only of border regimes but of entire borders. What today appears as a deadly border in the Mediterranean, neatly separating "Europe" from "Africa," was until the mid-1970s a space of indeterminacy (Lorcin and Shepard 2016). For the French, the Mediterranean became a tool for producing geographic and political imaginaries, fueled by force and violence and resulting in an imperial order that French officials reproduced time and time again. Making Algeria part of the early European integration process meant "doing empire," even after formal decolonization.

Calling to mind the surprising variability of border-making and the "doing of sovereignty" as well as the extinction of historical memory—what Ann Laura Stoler has termed "colonial aphasia" (Stoler 2016) in the second half of the 20th century—thus means practicing a reflexive use of the past. Also, because it means interrogating the own knowledge production by critically reflecting the sources with which we refer to the past and by doing justice to past logics. Dealing reflexively with our past calls for migration scholars to reflect upon implicit historical imaginaries and the historicity of the categories and terms they use with the aim of opening up alternatives, and of not partaking in the justification and reproduction of current migration and border regimes.

5. Conclusion

Referring to the past can help migration researchers to better understand the present in different ways. In fact, all three of the "modes of history" presented here promise considerable analytical gain. This is as true for a "deep history" mode that emphasizes the alwaysness and normality of migration as it is for a "genealogical" mode that aims to uncover and deconstruct the making of present discourses and structures, or for a "disruptive history mode" that emphasizes the otherness of past constellations. In all three cases, engaging with the past sharpens our understanding that current migration regimes, categorizations of mobility, and discourses about migration are produced and made in different ways.

First, historians' concern with the worldviews, agencies, and practices of historical actors—and their respective ways of creating, stabilizing, de-stabilizing or reframing social, political, and legal categories—thus proves productive for reflexive migration research, as it allows researchers to deal more sensitively with methodological nationalism and Eurocentrism as key conceptual challenges in reflexive migration research. Accessing the past through the perceptions and practices of historical actors destabilizes the "naturalness" of categories such as the region, the nation, or Europe, because we learn to conceive them as the result of a historical process. Moreover, it brings back the liminal character of categories of (non)belonging, inclusion, and exclusion, reminding us of their inherent tendency to reduce and generalize and thus to neglect the extent to which (historical and contemporary) structures stem from (asymmetrical) social practices across multiple and connected sites. The same holds true for Eurocentrism, a methodological trap which we cannot avoid completely, but with which we can deal much more consciously if we unpack the history of Eurocentric discourses and if we include in our analyses the agency of "migrant Others" and their role in shaping the contemporary world.

Second, sharpening our understanding of different modes of history also helps to strengthen the reflexive agenda. A deeper understanding of both the genesis of the present and of the non-linearity of the past can help us avoid reproducing existing power relations and discourses as it leads us not only to consider the historicity of the very categories with which we operate in our research, but also to search for the blind spots and positionalities of present methods of knowledge production on migration. A deeper knowledge of the processes that have led to the formation of hegemonic, exclusionary discourses, governmentalities, and practices can help us apprehend the mechanisms that stabilize hegemonic structures, asymmetric power relations, and racialist discourses—or that de-stabilize them. If we acknowledge malleability and contingency as a historical condition per se, we are able to grasp how specific historical actors in specific constellations produced—consciously or unconsciously—migration regimes by defining the terms of belonging, non-belonging, participation, and exclusion, and how these constellations became permanent while also remaining subject to constant renegotiation and transformation.

Conversely, dealing consciously with different modes of history can also train us for the future, because if we understand the malleability of the past we can also begin to think of alternative presents and futures. An awareness of the contingency and malleability of the past does not necessarily imply that "anything goes" (we can all change the present if we want to) or that "everything is random." Surely it is not. But a heightened awareness of the historicity of all things can help us to distance ourselves from current discourses and present formations in order to criticize or de-essentialize them—and to sharpen our understanding of alternatives.

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Notes

1. In our use of the term (migration and border) "regime," we follow other scholars in Border and Migration Studies that employ the term in order to emphasize "a social, conflictual process of negotiation on diverse scales and with a multitude of involved actors" (Hess 2012: 430). By putting the contentious negotiation "between regulative and mobile practices of migration" center stage (Rass and Wolff 2018: 22), this perspective acknowledges not only the complex interplay of the governing of migration and the practices of mobile people, but also the inherent "asymmetric power relation" (Tsianos and Karakayali 2010: 377).
2. This deep history mode also influences more popular representations of migration and of the history of migration. See for example the recent exhibition *Homo Migrans. Zwei Millionen Jahre unterwegs* (Bernisches Historisches Museum) <https://www.bhm.ch/de/ausstellungen/ausstellungsarchiv/homo-migrans/> accessed 29 August 2023.
3. There is fierce debate as to whether ethno-national resistances should be regarded primarily as a reaction to the effects of global interdependence, as has also recently been discussed with regard to the European Union, or whether global historians should keep a close eye on how local or regional dynamics gathered a momentum of their own that historians focusing solely on the bearing of global developments on particular locations may fail to notice (Bell 2018).

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