

## **Towards Reflexivity in Migration Studies. Knowledge Production in Times of Contested Politics and Post-Colonial Dynamics**

**10-11 September 2020, Technical University Berlin**

### **Detailed description of the conference theme**

The 'reflexive turn' (Nieswand/Drotbohm 2014) has a great potential to rebuild most common forms of knowledge production in studies of migration and mobility. Initiated by the calls to question methodological nationalism (Wimmer/Glick Schiller 2012) and to 'de-migranticize' research on migration and integration (Dahinden 2016), it implies the increased (self)-questioning in academic production of migration-related knowledge. Moreover, it suggests that the denaturalization of main categories of migration research (Amelina/Faist 2012) should go hand in hand with analytical questioning of 'categories of social practice' such as 'integration', 'asylum', 'poverty migration', 'refugee' etc. that migration scholars too often use as 'categories of analysis' (Brubacker 2013).

Moreover, knowledge production around 'migration' both within and outside the academia is not uncontested. It is embedded in the political and power struggles over the social definitions of membership and belonging (Horvath, Amelina & Peters 2017) – and hence, closely related to the logic of the nation state as well as of post-colonial representations. While migration-related categorizations signify some individuals as migrants generating the 'reality of migration' (Amelina 2017, Favell 2016), the change around these categorizations contributes to shifts in the hierarchies of inclusion and exclusion on a variety of scales. While categorizations relating to class, ethnicity/race, gender, sexuality, age/life cycle, health/disability and space constitute membership and belonging, their inscription in political, economic and educational settings and political regulations of human movements generate relatively stable but changeable hierarchically structured boundaries between 'Us' and 'Them' (Anderson 2013). The focus on the contested ideas and practices regarding migration-related knowledge production invites us to consider both the symbolic struggles and the ways in which they become inscribed in institutional, organizational and everyday settings. Such a focus, which is inspired by theories of gender and intersectionality and by the transnational lens on migration and (im)mobility, makes it possible to approach the knowledge-making and its contestations as social struggles over the power of definition and the power of domination.

The analyses of struggles over the knowledge-production requires a cross-border outlook that combines the post-, neo- and decolonial research with the analysis of the post-national(ist) relations as well as the space-sensitive transnational/global/urban lens to power and inequality relations (Hillmann et al. 2018; Sheller 2018). Such focus on the cross-border power asymmetries should enable us to understand a variety of conditions under which social inequality and marginality is generated, lived and experienced in concrete spatial settings. It will allow for analysis of everyday struggles of those who move and try to survive while crossing political-territorial borders and to overcome vulnerability. Moreover, post-, new-, decolonial including the postsocialist perspectives will enable us to more specifically address political struggles over the distribution of knowledge, power and resources across the globe.

Paying particular attention to public debates about migration and (im)mobility in sending and receiving (urban) settings is of extraordinary significance in this regard. As cities and more in general urban alliances have become mayor players in the contested field of 'integration' and have spurred migration-led policies to attract new inhabitants, they are in the focus of research.

In order to grasp the complex entanglements of academic and non-academic knowledge production, its multiple contestations as well as colonialisms/transnationalisms the conference seeks to approach four major challenges scholars regularly encounter – namely, (1) conceptual, (2) normative and (3) epistemological challenges, (4) methodological challenges, (5) the urban dimension.

To address the first challenge, we ask what are the most appropriate **conceptual tools** to address the nexus between the knowledge production and its contestations as well as the systems of dominance and inequalities that surround migration-related phenomena. How should the interplay of categorizations and conflicts over different recourses be addressed? And what theoretic innovations are best suited when one wants to understand the *Zeitgeist* and provide a diagnosis of our times?

The second challenge relates the **normativity** of one's own research. Migration scholars are challenged by specific media representations of 'migration' and the racialized vocabulary of current public debates. As a consequence, they must position themselves both within the scientific community and the sociopolitical landscape. One of the most pressing questions in this regard is how scholars can avoid reproduce political normative discourses and categories – and hence avoid reproducing hegemonic power structures?

Third, normativity is implicitly related to the **epistemological foundations** of migration research. Epistemological frameworks – whether realist, Marxist/materialist, poststructuralist or otherwise – are linked to specific normative positions. This makes reflecting on the relationship between epistemologies and one's 'situated knowledge' (Haraway 1988) or 'standpoint' (Harding 1999/Hill Collins 1990) highly relevant to understanding researchers' positionality in their research field and the way they interpret empirical findings. For this reason, it is necessary to closely examine the linkages between epistemologies and normativity in order to enable a reflexive use of conceptual tools and methodologies.

Forth, these arguments raise the question of how to investigate **methodologically** these entanglements between categorization processes around 'migration' and spatial politics and policy? Most research on migration is still done in the global North and it is 'on' and not 'with' migrants. How to de-colonialize and de-center research on migration in order to not reproduce hegemonic forms of dominance?

Fifth, migration and mobilities constitute a transforming power of places as they are bound to processes as well as negotiations on **different spatial scales**. Over the past two decades with its predominately neoliberal policies cities have become active players in organizing the field of migration, e.g. through their interaction in transnational city networks and through international exchange experiences. Especially in ageing societies cities started to compete to attract newcomers and specialized workers through programs. Further, it is in the cities, that the new global inequalities are spelled out locally and that civil society has instigated new forms of participation.

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