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INTRODUCTION



Reinventing the politics of knowledge production in migration studies: introduction to the special issue

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ABSTRACT

This special issue (SI) calls for reinventing the politics of knowledge production in migration studies. Academic migration research should make knowledge production an essential part of its research agenda if it wants to remain relevant in the transnational field of migration research. A risk of marginalisation stems from three interrelated tendencies: First, non-academic actors producing authoritative knowledge about migration have proliferated in recent years. Secondly, academic knowledge production is challenged both by counter-knowledge produced by social movements as well as new digital methods and information structures owned by policy-oriented and private actors. Thirdly, academics no longer hold a hegemonic position in the transnational field of migration research. The contributions to this SI interrogate the politics of knowledge production on migration along three lines of inquiry: (1) the enactment of migration as an intelligible object of government through practices of quantification, categorisation and visualisation; (2) the production of control knowledge in border encounters about subjects targeted as migrants and (3) the modes of thought seeking to unknow and re-know migration beyond dominant nation-state centric understandings. This introduction elaborates how the nine articles of the SI intervene in the politics of knowledge production in migration studies along these lines of inquiry.

KEYWORDS

Categorisation; constructivism; migration research; migration statistics; quantification; performativity

1. Introduction

In March 2022 the Federal Statistical Office announced that it would introduce a new category in Germany's migration statistics, namely: 'people with a history of immigration' (DeStatis 2023). The new category is supposed to replace the politically contested category 'person with migration background'. According to the definition used in Germany's micro-census, 'a person has a migration background, if they or one of their parents did not acquire German citizenship via birth' (Destatis 2022, 5). Since its introduction in Germany's population statistics in 2005, the category has been criticised on analytical, conceptual and political grounds. Among others, it has been accused (1) of

introducing a distinction between ‘first and second-class Germans’ (Mattioli 2006), (2) of subsuming a vast variety of highly diverse people under one category (Will 2022), and (3) of turning migration from a mobility-based activity into a permanent feature of a person inherited through ancestry (Renard 2018). At the same time, this statistical category has been picked up by the media and is widely used in policy and public discourse to the extent that it has become a social category (Elrick and Schwartzman 2015). In sum, the planned move towards a new statistical category that only includes people who either have personal migration experience or whose parents both do not have German citizenship therefore constitutes a success for the critics of the category ‘person with migration background’.

The crucial point is that this success has not been brought about by the work of critical academics alone (e.g. Elrick and Schwartzman 2015; Horvath 2019; Renard 2018; Will 2022). Rather, critical academic work was often inspired and amplified by critical counter-knowledge produced by antiracist and civil society initiatives. For example, the campaign ‘migration background for all!’, launched by the organisation *DeutschPlus e.V.*, featured a series of posters that were designed as advertisements for wall papers showing families who had immigrated to Germany. Below the slogan ‘migration background for all!’ a brief text ironically played on the ancestry-based definition of the category migration background with the following words:

Do you sometimes feel excluded because of your monotonous family tree? Have you always wished for an exciting migration background? Then order the new wallpapers of Deutsch-plus e.V. Bring a spirit of optimism in your four walls. Choose from different backgrounds: No matter if Anatolia, Vietnam, Iraq, Lebanon or Nigeria, we have the right one for you! (see image below). (Figure 1)

Similar campaigns and artistic and literary provocations were circulated by initiatives like *Kanak Attak* – whose members inverted the logic of the integration paradigm that underpins the category ‘person with migration background’ in short movies on ‘white ghettos’ or ‘the fairy tale of integration’.¹ Or writers like Feridun Zaimoglu seized the growing



Figure 1. Poster campaign ‘migration background for all!’ of the organisation DeutschPlus e.V., The postd was created by the artist Van Bo Le-Mentzel. Image taken from Will (2020).

interest in cultural production by migrants living in Germany to critique the double standard of a society that celebrated migrants' cultural products while denying them full social and political rights and – on a cultural and symbolic level – national belonging (Cheesman 2003).

In an interview in 2018, Zaimoglu condemned the term migration background as follows:

I always get a headache when I hear this word. I always think of migraine background. These are all words of the present that will not exist tomorrow. I am a bit puzzled, I am foreign-born, I can describe myself as a late German [Spätdeutscher], I can also say that I am a German with Turkish parents. Full stop. Other people can say the same thing without using any academic phrases. [...]. (Zaimoglu and Welty 2018; translation by the authors)

What this example demonstrates is, first, that a growing number of actors and institutions – many of which are working outside of academic institutions – are engaged in knowledge production about migration and claim authority for the knowledge they produce. Secondly, knowledge production on migration is consequently politically contested. Thirdly, migration scholars no longer hold – if they ever did – a hegemonic position regarding the production of authoritative knowledge about migration. In this special issue (SI) we take these three observations as a starting point to call for reinventing the politics of knowledge production in migration research. Indeed, these three tendencies have intensified in recent years.

2. The end of academic migration research as we know it?

Our starting point is that migration studies – that is: research on migration done by people affiliated with universities and other academic institutions – have come under wholesale critique from antiracist and decolonial perspectives and related social movements like *Black Lives Matter* or the *No Border* network. Scholars working from post- and decolonial perspectives (e.g. Achiume 2019; Mayblin and Turner 2021; Samaddar 2020; Tudor 2018) often build their arguments on earlier critiques which dismiss refugee and (forced) migration studies as academic disciplines that are dominated by interests and epistemic registers of the global North, ultimately serving attempts at containing desperate refugees from war-torn countries and dictatorships in the global Souths (Chimni 2009; Duffield 2008; Hatton 2018). They accuse migration and refugee studies, including more recent transnational perspectives, of ignoring the *coloniality of power* (Grosfoguel, Oso, and Christou 2015), understood as shifting entanglements of different forms of power (including 'sexual, political, epistemic, economic, spiritual, linguistic and racial forms of domination and exploitation') that are structured by racisms which carry colonial legacies and histories (Grosfoguel 2008).

This blind spot is often coupled with a profound *Eurocentric bias* which implicates that the bulk of migration studies – not the least to the fact that most funding is available in the global North – remains caught-up in a European or North American 'native point of view' (De Genova 2013). It implies that many studies continue to focus primarily on South–North migrations from a destination country perspective, or that concepts and theories which have been developed in the global North are uncritically applied to other contexts, thus (falsely) assuming these concepts and theories to be universal (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh 2020; Gorodzeisky and Leykin 2022).

Moreover, academic knowledge production on migration is also challenged by government agencies like the IOM or UNHCR that are finding new allies and building new data infrastructures to produce authoritative knowledge about migration beyond academic knowledge circuits. In the past decade, nearly all major organisations tasked with border and migration management on both the national and international levels have created their own research units and knowledge hubs (Bartels 2018; Cobarrubias 2019; Pécoud 2017), or subcontract their own commissioned studies (for critical analyses see: Scheel 2021; Wallace 2018). These organisations and their ‘migration experts’ often have privileged access to data and research sites, thus efficiently influencing cutting-edge debates and the state-of-the-art in some research areas, despite their research being shaped by and intended to further institutional interests and policy agendas. Examples for this ongoing development include the IOM’s *Global Migration Data Analysis Centre* (founded in 2015), the European Commission’s *Knowledge Centre on Migration and Demography* (created in 2016), the UNHCR-World Bank’s *Joint Data Centre on Forced Displacement* (since 2018), or the *Research Centre for Migration, Asylum and Integration* of Germany’s Federal Agency for Migration and Refugees (established in 2005).

Moreover, there has been a hype about new digital methods and data sources – most notably administrative data and various types of so-called big-data such as google searches, satellite images, mobile positioning or social media data – to produce timelier and more accurate statistics about stocks and flows of migrants (Dijstelbloem 2017; Meissner and Taylor 2024, this issue; Stielike 2022; Taylor and Meissner 2020). These new networks and data assemblages often involve private companies like *Facebook* or mobile network operators and challenge the dominant role of national statistical institutes in the production of quantitative knowledge about migration (Ruppert and Scheel 2019).² Importantly, they also introduce a data-driven approach to knowledge production that replaces existing with new concepts and definitions that are developed according to the available data. Hence, the data-driven approach of these new knowledge infrastructures will potentially fracture and reshape the very understanding of what migration is (Stielike 2022).

In conjunction, and this is the main concern of this SI project, these developments raise existential questions about the future of academic migration research and its politics of knowledge. In our view, academics need to acknowledge that they constitute only one of many producers of knowledge on migration. Besides scholars affiliated with academic institutions, these include experts in think tanks and consultancies, in research hubs and statistical offices or national and international organisations administrating border and migration management, as well as activists and campaigners of NGO’s and migrant support organisations. Importantly, all of these players compete for epistemic authority in what we conceive with scholars working in the tradition of Pierre Bourdieu as a *trans-national field of migration* research (Bigo 2011; Scheel and Ustek-Spilda 2019). Academic migration research increasingly becomes an afterthought in public debate, political deliberation as well as policy implementation on an operational level.

Of course, this raises questions for academic migration research: how to engage and navigate in a landscape of diverse claims for authority within this contested field of academic knowledge production? We argue that taking a defensive stand by adopting the strategy to dismiss the knowledge production of social movements, data scientists and critical intellectuals outside academia as ‘non-scientific’ in order to secure the privileged

position of an ‘epistemic authority’ (Geuss 2001) within the transnational field of migration research is not the answer. Such a move will rather deepen what we call – by paraphrasing Mike Savage and Roger Burrows (2007) – the coming crisis of academic migration research.

The same applies to the equally defensive strategy of invoking ‘scientific objectivity’ and the positivist myth of the scholar as a ‘neutral observer’ as a way to draw a clear-cut demarcation line between science (in this case: academic knowledge production) and politics. Such a stand is untenable, not the least in light of a series of insightful works from migration studies, which demonstrate the multiple entanglements between migration research and policy making (Baldwin-Edwards, Blitz, and Crawley 2019; Boswell 2009; Braun et al. 2018; Scheel and Ustek-Spilda 2019; Stierl 2022). In addition, feminist and postcolonial scholars point out that the myth of the (Western, male) scientist as a neutral observer speaking and seeing everything ‘from nowhere’ is precisely the ‘God’s-eye-trick’ (Haraway 1988) that authorises a form of epistemic domination based on the claim of a ‘truthful universal knowledge’ (Grosfoguel 2008). However, what the God’s eye trick conceals is the ‘political epistemic location of the structures of colonial power/knowledge from which the subject speaks’ (Grosfoguel 2008, 3).

Instead of knowing migration as either a human universal or a quintessentially modern phenomenon of state-formation, post- and decolonial approaches locate migration and its politics in the colonial controls of movement (Vigneswaran 2020), divisions of racial capitalism (Robinson [1983] 2000), transport of labouring populations, counter-historiographies of peoples and nations, and the ungovernable power of fugitivity (cf. Mayblin and Turner 2021). Seen from outside the vestiges of the West, migration thus appears to have far less to do with the state and its sovereign claims to territoriality and much more with invention and people’s capacities to live within the plunder of imperial conquest (Achieme 2019) and to mitigate the technoscientific destruction of the biosphere.

Instead of worn-out attempts at disciplinary closure, we therefore propose what one could call an offensive stance. It consists of making knowledge production an integral element of the research agenda and object of study of the field of migration studies. The most crucial aspect of this move is to develop conceptual tools and analytical sensibilities that account for the central role that knowledge production plays in the very constitution of migration as an object of study, policy-making, and governance. Rather than taking their object of study for granted all contributions to this SI therefore start from the observation that neither individual migrants nor migration can be readily researched and addressed in government interventions before a complex set of epistemic registers and knowledge practices are deployed. Building on the insights of works that show how migration is brought into being as a social phenomenon and an object of government through a wide array of knowledge practices (e.g. Crawley and Skleparis 2018; Scheel 2021; Schittenhelm and Schneider 2017; Supik and Spielhaus 2019; van Reekum and Schinkel 2017; Vigneswaran 2013), the contributions to this SI advance an understanding of knowledge practices as performative, political and situated, as it has been advanced in Science and Technology Studies (STS) (Law 2008; Mol 2002) as well as in feminist and postcolonial approaches (Grosfoguel 2008; Haraway 1988). In other words, knowledge practices and the socio-technical artefacts produced by them are political because they enact – that is: bring into being and perform – that to which they refer.

This move towards an understanding of knowledge practices as performative does more than advancing a constructivist understanding of migration, as it has been developed in critical and reflexive migration studies (e.g. Amelina 2021; Dahinden 2016; Dahinden, Fischer, and Menet 2020; Gorodzeisky and Leykin 2022; Scheel, Ruppert, and Ustek-Spilda 2019; Scheel and Tazzioli 2022; Scheel and Ustek-Spilda 2019; Tazzioli 2020). A conception of knowledge practices as performative invites scholars to begin their research with the following questions: how and through what kind of knowledge practices, categorisations, methods of quantification, devices of representations is migration enacted as a reality in the context under study? How do competitions over epistemic authority take place, between what kind of knowledge producers, with what kind of knowledge claims, at which sites, by what means and what are the stakes involved? And who is enacted as a (illegal, forced, economic etc.) migrant, asylum seeker, citizen and so forth in the situation under study? What kind of political narratives, policy instruments and strategies are enabled, legitimised, and foreclosed by particular forms of evidence and bodies of knowledge? What possibilities for and already existing forms of engagement against established knowledge regimes on migration do exist?

Asking these questions allows us – as illustrated by the contributions to this SI – to empirically demonstrate how knowledge production is intimately tied up with the formulation and implementation of particular migration policies and shaping the forms and spaces for contestation. Consequently, knowledge production on migration and individual migrants is not innocent but emerges as an inherently political affair.

3. Understanding the knowledge politics of migration

This SI gathers nine articles that empirically analyse knowledge practices along three lines of inquiry. First, several contributions focus on how migration is enacted as an object of government through different methods of quantification and categorisation, such as official statistics or big data analytics (Bartels 2024, this issue; Meissner and Taylor 2024, this issue; Will 2024, this issue). A second line of research attends to knowledge production in border encounters and migration-related legal proceedings (Scheel 2024, this issue; van der Kist 2024, this issue; Pollozek and Passoth 2024, this issue). Finally, a third set of contributions is concerned with the question how we might think about and know migration otherwise. This includes the production of critical counter-knowledge (Netz 2024, this issue; Will 2024, this issue) as well as the development of alternative conceptions of migration (Schinkel and van Reekum 2024, this issue) and doing migration research (Khosravi 2024, this issue). In the following, we elaborate on these three lines of inquiry and briefly introduce the contributions to each of them.

3.1 Enacting migration through knowledge production: engaging the politics of categorisation and quantification

The first line of inquiry starts from the observation that ‘from an epistemic point of view, migration does not exist independently of the concepts, definitions, methods, statistics, visualisations and various other data practices that are mobilised to produce knowledge on migration for the purposes of its “management”’ (Scheel, Ruppert, and Ustek-Spilda 2019, 579). This is because migration is an abstraction. It refers – depending on the

definition used – ‘to the decisions, practices and movements of scores of people who move and criss-cross national dividing lines in various ways and for various reasons and time-spans’ (Scheel, Ruppert, and Ustek-Spilda 2019). Consequently, migration only becomes tangible as a debatable, actionable reality and object of government, as an effect of knowledge and data practices as well as related artefacts generated by these practices. These include, for example, charts, maps and tables presenting numbers on stocks and flows of migrants (cf. Cobarrubias 2019; Ruppert and Scheel 2021a; Scheel and Ustek-Spilda 2019; van Reekum 2019). In brief, migration does not exist independently of intertwined processes of quantification and categorisation which both involve a plethora of data practices, such as defining, encoding, assigning, inferring, enumerating, cleaning, imputing and so forth (Scheel 2021).

Two important points follow from this. First, different methods of counting and categorising will enact migration in different ways. This can be illustrated through the planned move towards the new category ‘people with immigration history’ in Germany. The presently used category ‘person with migration background’ also enacts persons who have one parent that did not acquire German citizenship via birth as a people with a migration background. This wide definition results in a veritable ‘migrantisation’ of a large share of Germany’s population. According to figures published in 2020, 20.8 million people in Germany had a migration background, that is, about one quarter of the population. However, more than half of them – 10.9 million people – had German citizenship (Will 2022) and among minors the share of people with German citizenship was even 70% (Will 2020). Hence, the category migration background turns people with German citizenship who have been born and raised in Germany into ‘foreigners’. It is thus a category that carries and enacts assumptions about national (non)belonging. By allocating both people with personal migration experience and people with an inherited ‘migration background’ to the same category, ‘the “foreigner problematic” was doubled in numerical terms’ (Will 2020). In public and political debate, the numerical fact of one quarter of the German population having a migration background was – depending on the political orientation of the speaker – either invoked to call for stricter migration policies because there were already too many migrants or to diagnose an already-existing multicultural ‘post-migration society’ (Foroutan 2019). However, a different migration reality is enacted when the category ‘people with immigration history’ will be used. Since it only includes immigrants and their (direct) descendants, the category ‘people with immigration history’ includes ten percent less of the population of Germany than calculations based on the category ‘person with migration background’, in absolute numbers 18.2 instead of 20.8 million people (Petschel and Will 2020).³ Thus, the move towards the new category will decrease the share of the population with a migration background and thus deflate both claims about the alleged migration-driven diversity of German society and the scope of an alleged ‘integration problem’.

Hence, the example illustrates the second implication of a constructivist understanding of migration. Since knowledge practices enact the very realities they are meant to elucidate, measure and describe, they also shape and prefigure related problematisations and narratives in public debate and, eventually, policy interventions and practices of government (Scheel, Ruppert, and Ustek-Spilda 2019). Turning to material-semiotic approaches allows us to highlight the politicality of knowledge practices by emphasising that we are

actually confronted with a politics of the real – or ontopolitics (Law 2004; Mol 2002). This does not imply that knowledge producers can enact and shape realities as they please. One important connotation that is carried by the notion of enactment is precisely that realities only hold as long as the webs of relations that bring them into being ‘are enacted, enacted again, and enacted yet again – which may or not may happen in practice’ (Law 2008, 635). Moreover, material-semiotic approaches emphasise the materiality of knowledge practices in which social and technical, human and non-human elements are enmeshed in a ‘mangle of practice’ (Pickering 1995) to the extent that it is impossible to separate them out. The socio-technical networks that enable particular knowledge practices rely on a vast ‘hinterland’ of established standards, technical devices, accepted theories, professional networks etc. and these all come with their own constraints and affordances. The urge to stress both the conditionality and the relationality of knowledge practices is the main reason why scholars working with material-semiotics prefer using the term *enacting* over *performing* or *constructing*, which both tend to suggest that knowledge practice predominantly produce the intended effects of wilful human subjects (cf. Mol 2002; Ruppert 2011).

Hence, material-semiotics and related approaches in the tradition of actor-network theory such as a sociology of translation offer scholars of migration powerful tools to engage in situated analyses of the data and knowledge practices, as well as related data assemblages (Kitchin 2014), regimes of (non)knowledge (Scheel 2021) and information infrastructures (Bowker et al. 2010), that help to enact migration as intelligible reality, policy issue and object of government. What is key to such kinds of analyses is that they bring out the material, socio-technical nature of knowledge practices as well as their (onto)political effects. Rather than taking alleged numerical facts about migration for granted in order to use them as starting or reference points of research and policy deliberation, STS-inspired approaches allow for questioning and tracing them back to their sites of production (Gorodzeisky and Leykin 2022; Scheel 2021; Scheel and Ustek-Spilda 2019; Ruppert and Ustek-Spilda 2021b).

Moreover, these approaches are equally well equipped to scrutinise the performative powers of categories (Grommé and Scheel 2020) and related definitions and taxonomies (Gorodzeisky and Leykin 2022). These powers are particularly pronounced in the context of migration research, which often adopts state-centred categories, definitions and classification systems, such as the distinction between forced versus voluntary migration and related categories like asylum seeker, internally displaced people, refugee or irregular and transit migrant. The power of such categories to enact realities is particularly pronounced in the context of migration because these categories are, to paraphrase James Scott (1998, 3), allied with state-power and, in some instances, also infused with the force of law, as in the case of the ‘refugee’ (Zetter 2007) or the ‘illegal migrant’ (De Genova 2002). Or, even worse, migration-related categories may carry colonial legacies (El-Enany 2021; Kunz 2020), or support projects of nation-building and national belonging (Elrick and Schwartzman 2015; Grommé and Scheel 2020; Renard 2018).

The analytical and political purchase of approaches attending to the performativity of knowledge practices for studying the ‘making of migration’ (Tazzioli 2020) may be particularly powerful if it is combined with de- and post-colonial critiques of knowledge production. One important insight of this body of scholarship resides in the observation that migration studies often temporarily limit the study of migration, beginning with

the emergence of the nation-state. This ‘nation-state temporal trap’ (Ramirez 2020) implies, in turn, that migration is seen as a relatively recent phenomenon and that the histories and legacies of colonialism do not need to be considered in the study of migration. However, this perspective ignores the importance of previous European migrations to the global Souths during the era of colonisation and how colonial domination created and continues to shape a world marked by profound economic inequalities, political dependencies and racialised hierarchies which all affect contemporary migratory movements (Achiume 2019; Mayblin and Turner 2021). Moreover, colonialism also featured ‘epistemological subjugation’ (Ramirez 2020, 118), ‘epistemicides’ (Grosfoguel 2013) and ‘epistemic erasure’ (Collins 2022) as key strategies of domination, that is, the destruction and marginalisation of knowledge produced in the colonised global Souths. The related ‘view that knowledge produced in Europe and the United States is authoritative in nature and “universal” in application to all human phenomena worldwide’ (Ramirez 2020, 118) is still influential within the field of migration studies, as epitomised by the unquestioned application of theories, concepts and categorisations that have been developed in the global North to research contexts in the global Souths. Hence, migration scholars need to consider how colonial histories and continuities continue to shape both contemporary migrations and how these migrations are studied and conceptualised in migration studies.

Taking cue from these insights and approaches, three contributions to this SI engage with the politics of categorisation and quantification in migration research. In her contribution Inken Bartels (2024, this issue) showcases the analytical surplus value of combining material-semiotic approaches with post- and de-colonial critiques of governance. She analyses how international organisations like the IOM or the World Bank engage, often with the support of EU-funding, in a veritable epistemic imperialism as they introduce, under the guise of capacity building, migration-related categories in the statistical systems of West-African countries like Senegal or the Gambia, such as ‘illegal migration’ or ‘return migration’, that primarily serve the political interests and agendas of destination countries in Europe. Bartels shows how these interventions and the introduction of Eurocentric categorisations ultimately result in the enactment of multiple, potentially conflicting migration realities in West Africa.

In her contribution, Anne-Kathrin Will (2024, this issue) combines material-semiotic approaches with discussions on *statactivism* (Bruno, Didier, and Vitale 2014) to contribute, with a genuinely new perspective, to critical scholarship on the politically contested category ‘person with migration background’ that has been used in German migration statistics since 2005. Will shows how the category is in effect used as a proxy that allows the German statistical office to produce ethnic statistics. Based on this critique, she discusses three strategies of statactivism that have contributed to more recent debates calling for the replacement of the category ‘person with migration background’ (see above).

Finally, Fran Meissner and Linnet Taylor (2024, this issue) interrogate the proliferation of public-private data alliances and related migration information infrastructures that try to repurpose various kinds of digital transactional data for the quantification and monitoring of flows and stocks of migrants. They are primarily interested in the political and ethical implications of these new migration information infrastructures and how they reshape the production of migration statistics. Meissner and Taylor show

that these new circuits of knowledge production on migration are problematic as they open up the potential for new modes of migration control that are primarily probabilistic, based on profiling, forecasting and on conceptualising migration as risk. Hence, they ask what these new migration information infrastructures mean for the ethics and practicalities of doing migration research. The authors propose to combine insights from STS and critical data studies to an approach that allows to re-visibility the migration information infrastructures that facilitate the production of these new datasets in order to open them up to intervention and critique.

3.2 Enacting migrants as knowable, governable subjects: the production of control knowledge in border encounters

In this section, we focus on the substance and process of producing knowledge on controlling migrants and ‘managing’ migration. What kind of control knowledge on migration is produced, how is it made, and how does it become to matter? Critical migration studies scholars have shown, time and again, that ‘borders make migrants’ (De Genova 2013) insofar as migration results from the clash between human mobility and the prerogative of nation-states to control access to, as well as conditions of stay on, their respective territories (Anderson 2017; Scheel and Tazzioli 2022; Sharma 2020; van Reekum and Schinkel 2017). What has not been sufficiently considered so far is the crucial role that knowledge practices play in the enactment of (some) people as migrants. Hence, one central concern of this SI is to show how such ‘control knowledge’ (Karakayali and Tsianos 2007, 17) is produced through socio-technical, epistemic devices in border encounters, that is, situations in which people on the move encounter actors, means and methods of border and mobility control (Scheel 2019, 97–102).

By control knowledge, we mean knowledge that is produced either for the regulation and control of migration or for the day-to-day government and monitoring of the movements, practices and identities of individuals targeted as migrants as well as decision-making on their claims. From this follows that control knowledge is saturated with power and often has immediate consequences for the people to which it refers. In the context of contemporary border and migration management, such knowledge often aims at translating mobile individuals hitherto unknown to state authorities into re-identifiable, governable subjects (Leese 2022; Pelizza 2020; Scheel 2023). In order to identify migrants and to assess migrants’ right claims various means to produce unambiguous knowledge and ‘hard’, juridically relevant evidence are mobilised in order to assess the truthfulness and credibility of migrants’ own accounts (Amelung et al. 2020). This involves an increasingly sophisticated apparatus of socio-material and epistemic devices. Examples range from the nowadays nearly ubiquitous use of biometric identification technologies (e.g. Amelung 2021; Frowd 2018; Glouftsiou 2021; Scheel 2019) to country of origin determination in screening situations conducted by organisations such as Frontex, EASO or national asylum bureaucracies (Aradau and Perret 2022; Passoth and Pollozek 2024, this issue; van der Kist et al. 2019), or usage of forensic technologies such as DNA-testing in family reunification procedures (Lee and Voigt 2020), or x-rays in age verification procedures of migrants claiming to be minors (Netz 2024).

What this necessarily incomplete selection of examples shows is that the production of control knowledge in border encounters is technology-intensive. One reason for the

technologisation and digitalisation of border and migration management is that innovative technologies help to imbue the knowledge produced with an aura of scientific objectivity and technological neutrality. Innovative information, identification and surveillance technologies do not only produce data on migrants' practices, movements, whereabouts and bureaucratic trajectories as alternative sources of truth. They also help to turn these data into hardly disputable 'facts' for street-level bureaucrats to work with in so-called credibility assessments and related processes of decision-making. In brief, these technologies allow for translating unstable knowledge claims haunted by all sorts of gaps, uncertainties and inconsistencies into collectively stabilised, authoritative knowledge that is – as far as possible – protected from contestation (Latour 1987).

To cite one example: In his contribution Stephan Scheel (2024, this issue) explores how the use of speech biometrics and the extraction and analysis of asylum seekers' mobile phone data for purposes of country of origin determination affects decision-making on asylum applications. What the analysis shows is that numerous practices and devices, such as algorithms, cooperating asylum seekers providing their phones, a functioning reading device, encryption software used to comply with data protection regulations, computer interfaces, result reports, senior officials authorising their release etc. need to come together and have to be coordinated in complex 'human-machine configurations' (Suchman 2006) to make this production of control knowledge work. It is, however, still human case-workers who translate clues about an asylum seeker's country of origin into legally relevant evidence in the asylum hearing. Hence, while technology helps to produce control knowledge that is durable and authoritative, it also allows the human case worker to assume the position of the epistemic gatekeeper. The highly asymmetric power relations resulting from these technologically-mediated assessments of asylum seekers' own accounts lead Scheel to diagnose a particular form of data colonialism that facilitates the epistemic domination of migrants by means of data extraction.

The first analytical-political advantage of STS-inspired analyses is then that mobilising material-semiotic perspectives enables scholars to unpack the sociotechnical practices and processes which make knowledge robust, reliable, workable, and legitimate for decision-making in order to open them up for critical intervention that are based on a robust, in-depth analysis how these technologically mediated processes of knowledge production work.

Such analysis also reveals – and this is their second analytical-political advantage, how the production of control knowledge is deeply entrenched in a 'culture of suspicion' (Jubany 2011) which frames migrants as liars, truth-distorters (Griffiths 2012) or even posits them – in continuation of racist knowledge inherited from the colonial period – as subjects incapable of speaking the truth (Lorenzini and Tazzioli 2018). Technologically mediated knowledge practices enact migrants as members of 'suspect communities' (Pantazis and Pemberton 2009, 649; Skinner 2020; Tutton, Hauskeller, and Sturdy 2014) and thus help to entrench asymmetric power relations in credibility assessments and related decision-making processes about migrants' claims in border encounters. Material-semiotic analysis allows to show that this entanglement of the technologically-mediated production of control knowledge and institutionalised distrust in border encounters is twofold: On the one hand, the framing of migrants and asylum seekers as 'vile liars and truth distorters' (Griffiths 2012) and the related institutionalisation of a culture of suspicion in migration administrations underpins the call for and

justifies the use of highly-intrusive identification and surveillance technologies as alternative means of truth production (see Scheel 2023, this issue). On the other hand, the use of such devices and technologies materially inscribes this institutionalised distrust in border encounters and related assessments and decision-making procedures (Noori 2022).

Likewise, Silvan Pollozek and Jan-Hendrik Passoth (2024, this issue) understand the screening materials used by Frontex border guards as ‘devices of suspicion’. Importantly, their STS-inspired approach permits them to emphasise the agential effects of material devices such as booklets, dossiers, questionnaires, images, and forms, showing how they structure the situation of identity verification. With reference to STS and recent research on suspicion and credibility assessment, they argue that those materials not only produce control knowledge but work as socio-material devices of suspicion that translate the actions, stories and performances of newly arriving migrants into accounts of truthfulness or deceit. As performative devices, these materials do things: they frame cases, script interactions, code statements, create stigmata of belonging, and produce purified accounts, and thus enact multiple forms of suspicion.

Finally, all three contributions in this issue (Pollozek and Passoth 2024; Scheel 2023; van der Kist 2024) illustrate the third analytical-political advantage of STS-inspired analyses of the production of control knowledge in border encounters: they allow to destabilise and contest this knowledge, as well as the socio-technical devices and human-machine configurations mobilised for its production, through a situated, in-depth analysis enabling persuasive, robust lines of critique. In his contribution Jasper van der Kist (2024, this issue) scrutinises another production site of control knowledge: the Country-of Origin Information (COI) unit of the Austrian Federal Office for Immigration and Asylum. In recent years, COI-units have been set-up by Western governments in response to growing numbers of asylum seekers with complex flight stories. These units are tasked with producing reliable, juridically sound COI that can be used by migration officials, judges and policy-makers in their decision-making. Drawing on the work of Maria Puig de la Bellacasa (2017) and based on in-depth ethnographic research, the author mobilises the notion of tinkering to destabilise this authoritative control knowledge. Van der Kist investigates how officials make use of pragmatic know-how, material equipment, and available sources of information at disposal to produce workable COI under conditions of irreducible uncertainty. He shows how these alleged experts cobble together a workable version of reality with the methodologies and materials at hand to satisfy the needs of the unwitting case officer whose demands as the end-user of COI reports shapes the very content of these reports.

In sum, all three contributions demonstrate the analytical and political surplus value of the STS-repertoire to unpack and unsettle the production of control knowledge in border encounters and related attempts to translate migrants into knowable, governable subjects. They also show that the analytical sensitivities and concepts of the STS-repertoire can be combined with feminist and decolonial thinking to develop powerful critiques of contemporary modes of border and migration management. For example, Scheel (2024, this issue) extends on decolonial perspectives to develop a critique that focuses on the epistemic injustice and epistemic violence implicated by the digitisation of asylum procedures. van der Kist (2024, this issue) uses, in turn, insights from feminist science and technology studies to show how country experts foster care for some things – i.e. the workload of case officers – at the expense of others – i.e. the experience of the

asylum seeker. Thereby these authors contribute to analyse and reflect – in line with other critical scholars and activists – on ways to disrupt and complicate the epistemic registers, classification, categorical grids and methods of (control) knowledge production.

3.3 Contesting the politics of knowledge production in migration research: unknowing and reknowing migration

Taken together, the contributions to this SI raise the question, how we could know migration otherwise. If migration does not exist as an intelligible object of government independently of the knowledge practices that are used to know it, and if people are enacted as migrants through the production of control knowledge in border encounters, this raises the question how scholars can contribute to reinventing the politics of knowledge production in migration research. Precisely because academic knowledge practices help to enact the very migration realities to which they refer, scholars have the responsibility to take care of the ontopolitical effects of the knowledge they produce (Bellacasa 2017). At the same time, they have the potential to intervene in the ontopolitics of migration, that is, the politics revolving around the question of how and through what kind of methods, definitions, (tacit) assumptions and categorisations migration is enacted as an intelligible, actionable reality.

In this SI, three articles, in particular, engage with the challenge to un-know and re-know this curious object of scientific knowledge production called ‘migration’ by attempting to displace, if not erase, existing definitions, modes of knowing and disciplinary boundaries that circumscribe migration as a theoretical concept and methodological compass. While calls for reflexivity, accountability and critique have intensified in migration studies for some time (e.g. Amelina 2021; Braun et al. 2018; Dahinden, Fischer, and Menet 2020; De Genova 2013; Garelli and Tazzioli 2013; Stierl 2022), the challenge at hand is not reducible to a mere amelioration of our ways of knowing. It is not sufficient to repair or improve the existing ways in which we know and argue about migration. Rather, the challenge resides, first, in engaging with the question how it came to be that migration became an object of research in its current Eurocentric, state-centred composition in order to develop, second, alternative epistemic registers and modes of knowing that allow to enact migration differently. One way of achieving this resides in attending to ways in which people who have been enacted and targeted as migrants have sought to resist, evade, refuse and escape those ways of knowing and world-making through (alternative) visions and enactments of togetherness in the world. How might social research find common ground with these publics and help to sustain and extend world-making against migration in its current composition as a problem of government and security? While it is certainly beyond the scope of this introduction to conclusively answer these questions, we would like to point out a few recent contributions engaging with the challenge of un-knowing and re-knowing migration.

One important line of thought lies in the development of a genealogy of the currently hegemonic nation-state centric conception of migration as movement and resettlement from one nation-state to another one. To this regard, Yann Stricker shows how the consolidation of the category ‘international migration’ in population statistics was inter-related ‘with a shift from an imperial to an inter-nationalist point of view’ (Stricker 2019, 469) on human mobility. Attempts of the International Labor Organization

(ILO) to produce statistics on ‘migrant workers’ on a global scale raised concerns among British officials about the meaning of borders within the British Empire, which comprised colonies, protectorates, dominions, mandates and the British Raj at that time. The ILO’s request to provide data on the movements of workers who cross an international border was greeted with great scepticism by British officials who insisted that movements within the empire were not international in character. The underlying fear was that the use of national dividing lines in the conception of migration by the ILO and the production of respective migration statistics could fuel claims for independence of nationalistic movements within the British and other colonial empires (Stricker 2019, 475–476). Hence, British officials insisted on labelling emigration from the United Kingdom to the dominions and colonies as ‘oversea settlement’. By showing that the emergence of the nation-state point of view on migration is a relatively recent development Stricker’s careful analysis demonstrates that conceptions of migration are contingent and open to contestation and change.

Taking cue from Stricker’s work, Stephan Scheel and Martina Tazzioli (2022) develop an alternative definition of a migrant that embraces the perspective of mobility. Their starting point is the observation that nation-state centred conceptions of migration as movement from nation-state A to nation-state B rest on a deeply entrenched methodological nationalism. This methodological nationalism implicates, in turn, three epistemological traps that continue to shape much of research on migration: first, the naturalisation of the international nation-state order that results, secondly, in the ontologisation of ‘migrants’ as ready-available objects of research, while facilitating, thirdly, the framing of migration as problem of government. They show that the naturalisation of the ‘national order of things’ (Malkki 1995) results in an obfuscation of the central role that practices of bordering of nation-states play in the very constitution of people as migrants. To overcome nation-state centred understandings of migration and the epistemic traps implicated by them, Scheel and Tazzioli (2022) propose an understanding of migration that places the struggles people enacted as migrants have to engage in in order to move to or stay in a desired place, at the centre of the analysis. In this way, the constitutive role of nation-states’ practices of bordering and boundary-drawing immediately become the focus of any study on migration. Rather than movement from one national container to another one, migration thus emerges as a terrain of irreducibly political struggles over access to mobility, rights and other resources.

Another mode of re-knowing migration is offered by decolonial approaches which seek to address the ‘colonial amnesia’ (Mayblin and Turner 2021, 75) of migration studies. By focusing nearly exclusively on contemporary migrations, the discipline of migration studies – which only became institutionalised at a few universities in the global North after the Second World War – has effectively displaced the crucial role that colonial conquest and domination, and related racial hierarchies and discriminations, play in shaping past and present migrations. To overcome this colonial amnesia of migration studies, as well as its ontopolitical effects, Tendayi Achiume (2019) develops an understanding of migration as decolonisation. Through a detailed analysis, she shows that citizens from countries in the global South have an ethical and political claim to inclusion in countries in the global North, whose wealth is based on colonial conquest and exploitation and continuing neo-colonial relations. Central to Achiume’s argument is the contestation of the claimed prerogative of nation-states

in the global North to exclude migrants from the global South through racialised border regimes by referring to their alleged sovereignty. Starting from the observation that colonial racism – and in particular the denial of the capacity for self-government to ‘uncivilised’ people – was crucial for the conception of sovereignty and the justification of colonial rule, Achiume suggests that we should view nation-states, due to histories of colonial conquest and domination, as complexly interconnected political communities. This conceptual move towards co-sovereignty permits her to argue that migrants from the global Souths have just claims to be included as equals in these communities because ‘historical and continuing Third World subjection to and exploitation by the First World’ make it ethically and politically necessary to ‘extraterritorialize the demos beyond nation-state borders such that its boundaries are contiguous with those of neo-colonial empire’ (Achiume 2019: 1549). In the absence of sufficient structural changes in global power asymmetries inherited from the colonial era, Achiume argues, migration constitutes a form of personal decolonisation. She writes:

Given the failure of formal independence to undo colonial subordination, for some Third World persons, so-called economic migration may enact a process that enhances individual determination within neocolonial empire [...]. This personal pursuit of enhanced self-determination (which asserts political equality with First World citizens) is thus decolonial; it is migration as decolonization. (Achiume 2019, 1522)

Building on Achiume’s work, Sabine Netz (2024, this issue) traces some of the (post-)colonial and capitalist entanglements and relations that are hidden from view to stabilise the usually taken-for-granted migrant-citizen divide that underpins nation-state centred understandings of migration. Inspired by the actions and counter-knowledge of migrant activists, Netz’s analysis shows how illegalised, deported migrants are effectively an essential, indispensable element of German society. It is the hyper-exploitation of their labour power in Europe’s agri-food industry that underpins the production of affordable food for German citizens, and which thus proves to be constitutive for the German model of citizenship as well as the much-acclaimed German welfare state. Finding common ground between Marxist analysis of value extraction and Mol’s material-semiotic attention for eating, this analysis allows us to understand contemporary models of (national) citizenship as being materially and politically entangled with (post-)colonial histories of capitalist food production and transnational circuits of sustenance and labour exploitation, or, in Sabine Netz’ words, as ‘incorporated beyond’.

In their historical and political reconstruction of migration as a scientific object, Willem Schinkel and Rogier Van Reekum (2024, this issue) argue that the enactment of migration crucially involves an *oikonomic* mode of accounting, that is, a form of book-keeping on the benefits and disadvantages of the presence of immigrants from the perspective of ‘the native’. Migration’s accounting emerges, in the early twentieth century, out of imperial and colonial ways of knowing geographies and peoples. The authors find that statistical methods and international attempts to standardise definitions and measurements operate as forms of accounting that render migration into debt. Migration, as an epistemic problem, introduces debt as the constitutive form in which migrants must relate to those who are formal citizens. Precisely in terms of its accounting practices, migration must appear and be politically managed as the addition of lives that *could also not have happened* and therefore constitute a cost for the native population.

Migration's accounting plays a pivotal role in the enactment of politico-economic realities as it marks what is constituted as outside of national, economic life while also introducing within the national economy outstanding debts that are yet to be resolved and for which migrants must – somehow – pay. In the final part of their contribution, Van Reekum and Schinkel try to counter and destabilise this enactment of migration as debt by drawing recent work on reparations and decolonisation.

A third contribution that struggles with nation-state-centred understandings of migration and their (post-) colonial entanglements and continuities is provided by Shahram Khosravi (2024, this issue). In the most personal, and arguably one of the most political, contributions to the SI, Khosravi recounts his engagement with migration studies as one of accent. In his words, being both a scholar of migration in a European university and a non-European migrant introduces tensions that cannot be resolved from within the dominant lexicon and disciplinary habits that currently define academic migration research. Coming to terms with these difficulties, Khosravi develops a resolutely non-disciplinary set of associations and concepts around what he calls *accented thinking*. Together with many other thinkers and researchers who have sought to study and know the world from the margins or as outsiders in hegemonic institutions, he invites us to refuse the telos of inclusion that is so deeply ingrained in much of the thinking that goes on in migration studies. Why would inclusion and belonging *have to* be the solution to whatever problems are associated with migration? Why would an accent be, in the end, something to be overcome? Would it not be far more adequate and indeed generative to engage in accented thinking and nurture one's accent in order to develop it into a distinct voice? Khosravi proposes to use accent as a method, as a way out of the inevitable participation in bordering and boundary-drawing that are implicated in the very study of migration and the related, widely-held assumption that inclusion is possible and even necessary.

Running through these works is the shared impetus to un-know and re-know migration beyond dominant understandings which are nation-state centric while being ignorant of (post-)colonial legacies. This endeavour entails, first and foremost, a refusal to reduce migration to cross-border mobility and settlement. As all three contributions show, there is always something more involved in the enactment of migration and the constitution and targeting of (some) people as migrants. This 'something more' includes, most notably, (post-)colonial legacies, entanglement and continuities, practices of bordering and boundary-drawing implicated by the nation-state system, as well as racist discourses, differentiations and discriminations informing and shaping these practices. Any conception that reduces migration to cross-border movement, even if such movement is considered a human universal, brings us back into the orbit of government and its borders, renders migration into the bodily event of a crossing and thereby has already somehow accepted the claimed prerogative of nation-states to control access to their territories. Rather, migration enters our world and has effects on it not because some originary movement has taken place and not even necessarily because certain movement are being arrested or rerouted, but because the epistemic and political infrastructures that make migration exist constitute circuits of extraction and incorporation (Netz 2024, this issue), oikonomic relations of indebtedness (Schinkel and Van Reekum 2024, this issue), and biographical and professional itineraries struggling against an ineffable and always insufficient loss of accent (Khosravi 2024, this issue).

4. In lieu of a conclusion: just one of many beginnings

The central claim of this SI is that academic migration studies, in order to avoid its marginalisation in the transnational field of migration research, has to acknowledge and engage with the multiplicity of voices and actors claiming to produce authoritative, politically relevant knowledge on migration. Instead of practicing what one could call academic boundary drawing by insisting on the alleged superiority of academic knowledge production, academics should seek to actively re-invent their knowledge production and contribute to democratic ways of migration. A defensive posture that tries to secure the epistemic authority of academic knowledge production by disqualifying any critique as lay knowledge was actually never appropriate and is today quickly becoming ineffective as the field of knowledge production is shifting. We can neither afford to be passive observers, nor is it sufficient to describe the many deficiencies of past practices. We ought to invent ways of knowing migration that no longer depend on any fixed boundary between knower and known. This move towards epistemic openness (rather than epistemic closure) requires that we make knowledge production itself an integral element of our research agendas and object of study of migration studies.

The most crucial aspect of this move resides in developing conceptual tools and analytical sensibilities that account for the central role that knowledge production plays in the very constitution of migration as an object of study, policy-making, political debate and intervention. In this SI we have assembled articles that put into action this agenda of reinvention along three lines of inquiry. We have introduced a range of intellectual and conceptual resources that may help scholars of migration to engage in and reinvent the politics of knowledge production in migration research. These include, inter alia, insights and analytical sensitivities from STS (and in particular (post-)ANT and material-semiotics), post- and de-colonial approaches, as well as activist counter-knowledge produced by social movements and intellectuals working outside of academic institutions. It is of course possible – as the contributions to this SI demonstrate vividly – to combine these resources and modes of inquiry and we would like to encourage others to engage in such creative, but nevertheless *careful* recombinations. Hence, we do not understand this SI as *the* starting point of a reinvention of the politics of knowledge production in migration research, but just as one of many beginnings.

In this sense, we would like to close this introduction with what one could call a health warning and a call to arms which are both informed by a politics of care (Bellacasa 2017). We wish to alert scholars to the risks of blind applications of insights, concepts and methods that have been developed in other fields and contexts, such as STS or postcolonial theory, to the field of migration studies. STS-inspired concepts and approaches offer a prime example to show that this will simply not work. We would just like to invoke two issues to clarify this point. First, STS-approaches were mostly developed in ‘sanitary’ settings, such as laboratories or hospitals. But what happens if STS-inspired concepts and analytical sensitivities are put to work in border encounters and other situations that are characterised by highly asymmetrical power relations? We are convinced that the parameters and conditions of these contexts and situations make it necessary to rethink and adapt STS-inspired concepts and approaches, including some of the basic premises of STS-research. For example, the insistence of actor-network-theory and its conceptual descendants on a ‘flat ontology’⁴ (Latour 2005) tends to undermine the very concepts

that prove to be central to the enactment and understanding of migration. This includes, for instance, the notion of sovereign power and the related claim of nation-states to control access to their territories (on this point see the insightful conversation of critical IR-scholars Mark Salter and William Walters (2016) with Bruno Latour). Hence, in power-laden contexts of borders and migration it will not be enough to ‘unscrew the big leviathan’ (Callon and Latour 1981). What is required, both analytically and politically, are conceptual distinctions between different modes of power, which – while betraying the insistence on a flat ontology – offer a conceptual language to account for and challenge nation-states’ ever more laborious attempts to realise the idea of nation-state sovereignty at today’s borders and the ever more violent practices and at times lethal effects generated by these attempts. Hence, what is needed for an honest dialogue between STS and migration studies is thus not a blind and lazy application, but a great deal of conceptual and intellectual care, or, in the words of Puig de la Bellacasa (2017): thinking with care.

The second issue we want to raise in this regard concerns the situated and pragmatist approach of STS and the related ambition to work with practitioners and intervene in the field under study (Sismondo 2008). Again, we are convinced that this strive towards practical engagement with practitioners will have to be reconsidered in the power-laden contexts of border and migration management (for the related case of security practitioners see: Weiss Evans, Leese, and Rychnovská 2021). What happens to the ‘engaged agenda’ (Sismondo 2008) of STS if scholars may not want to contribute to improving or normalising the practices and technologies of migration control they research but actually conclude that these technologies and practices – precisely because of the violent effects and discriminations they enact – should not exist at all? Starting from the observation that it is practices of bordering and boundary-drawing which make migrants (Scheel and Tazzioli 2022), future research on borders and migration and related politics of knowledge production should also be able to accommodate a border abolitionist approach (Tazzioli 2023) and related attempts to undo, in practical and epistemic terms, the conditions that facilitate the enactment and problematisation of (some) people as migrants. Allowing for such radical modes of intervention in the politics of migration requires, however, to reinvent and practice the engaged agenda of STS-inspired research beyond its existing pragmatist varieties.

Taking Puig de la Bellacasa’s (2017) call for a politics of care as a signpost for practical engagement may offer a way out of this conundrum. On the one hand, an engaged agenda should not be reduced to engagement with practitioners, at least not if the term ‘practitioner’ is reserved to border security professionals, migration case workers and other state officials. After all, critical migration studies have a long tradition of approaching migrants and their supporters as key stakeholders and practitioners. On the other hand, practical engagement of STS-inspired research in the context of borders and migration might therefore mean, precisely, to ‘actively contribute to democratizing th[e] technological culture[s]’ (Bijker 2003, 444) of contemporary border and migration management. Following radical democratic lines of thoughts in the tradition of Rancière and Balibar we propose to open up technological cultures for disagreeing views to the status quo (Balibar 2008; Rancière 2004). We suggest embracing Balibar’s notion of ‘democratizing democracy’ that includes identifying sites in which the conflictual and the alternative have sufficient space for consideration (Balibar 2008). Positions

need to be seriously taken into account that allow to include fundamental critique and contestation of the very existence and normalisation of technologised and datafied border regimes per se. This implies, in practice,

to show to a broad array of audiences – politicians, engineers, scientists, and the general public – that science and technology are value laden, that all aspects of modern culture are infused with science and technology [... and that] it is therefore necessary that science and technology [...] be subject to political debate. (Bijker 2003, 444)

Hence, in terms of a politics of care, pursuing an engaged agenda in context of the politics of knowledge production on migration thus also implies being conscious and careful about the methods, concepts and language we use in our research (precisely because of their performativity), and to be mindful of the practitioners and audiences we engage with (because of the migration worlds that may emerge from these engagements).

Notes

1. To access the short movies (in German only) refer to the webpage of *Kanak Attak* which is still active despite of the group's dissolution in 2012: <https://www.kanak-attak.de/ka/kanaktv/volume1.html> (30.08.2022).
2. It should be noted that national statistical institutes are also experimenting with and increasingly also using various sources of 'Big Data' for the production of official statistics. This is also a response to widespread concerns among statisticians about losing relevance or being sidelined by these new data alliances (cf. Ruppert and Scheel 2019).
3. These figures are based on data from Germany's micro-census from 2018 and have been confirmed by the German statistical office on 16th December 2022.
4. A flat ontology basically follows from ANT's conception of any entity as the performative effect of sociotechnical networks consisting of elements that are themselves effects of ever-contingent configurations of sociotechnical assemblages (Couldry 2020, 1141). The task of the analyst is then to follow and describe these networks and the relations between its elements without making a priori assumptions on how these elements relate to each other. The relational ontology proposed by ANT is then flat in the sense that ANT refuses to assume any hierarchical relations between entities i.e. that one dominates or causes the other, is superior to the other etc. This is why ANT-inspired research refuses the imposition of pre-defined theory on the situation to be analysed, including particular notions of power or social or political order.

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