

Prof Annette Jünemann/ Dr. Hamza Safouane (HSU)

**Migrants' Agency
Key to a Better Understanding of Human Mobility**

(Interne Forschungsförderung HSU 2017/ 2018)

For several years, the European Union (EU) has been reeling from a significant arrival of migrants that peaked in fall 2015. The EU's containment measures and migration policy updates constitute at best *ad hoc* reactions to changing migratory practices, but cannot articulate policies that take into account migration's complexity and entangled dimensions. The public discourse on migration and the practices of migration management and border surveillance reflect the subjective perspective of receiving and transit states that systematically problematizes migrants. This perspective, however, fails to consider the subjectivity of migrants themselves, thereby leaving significant blindspots in the understanding of human mobility, its political and economic causes as well as its impact on state sovereignty and borders. In this regard, we identified five major conceptual deficits that pervade the public discourse on migration and subsequent policies:

1. The binary distinction between (political) refugees and (economic) migrants ignores the variety of causes of human mobility and the intersectional differences such as gender, age, or social backgrounds that contribute to people's migration decisions.
2. The problematization of migrants, which ignores the numerous dangers of migratory journeys, corresponds to a narrow definition of 'violence' that neglects harmful social, political, economic and juridical structures. Various forms of "structural violence" are vectors of migration and have a significant impact on the journey.
3. The perception of internally stable, peaceful and orderly receiving and/or transit countries disrupted by the imported chaos, insecurity and violence of migrants' crisis ridden countries is a bias. It ignores historical, political, economic and geopolitical contexts that produce migration, borders, and the regime of control.
4. The simplistic understanding of the migratory journey as a linear and unidirectional movement between a departure point and an arrival point ignores the complex processes that precede, accompany and follow the journey.
5. Migrants' agency, including the logics of action underlying migratory choices and strategies, is either weakly conceptualized or ignored.

The aim of the project is to overcome the substantial lack of knowledge stemming from those five interrelated conceptual shortcomings and biases on migration. Drawing on the "migration-violence nexus" developed by Bank, Fröhlich and Schneiker (Bank et al., 2016), the objective of our research project is to continue the conversation on migration as a process 'out of, through and into violence'. This perspective prompts a research agenda in migration studies that deproblematizes migrants and focuses instead on examining their journey experiences. We hold that the multiple forms of violence that migrants undergo in the sending country, while on the move, and at the destination (often viewed as a safe haven) have not yet been sufficiently examined. Johan Galtung's concept of structural violence (1969) is helpful in this regard because it encompasses physical and psychological harm resulting from social, political, legal and spatial conditions composing the migration management regime and that produce discrimination, oppression and marginalization. Also relevant to our research agenda is the analysis of the geopolitical, economic, social and juridical circumstances that produce migrants and the regime of migration control and management. Our interest in migrants' subjective outlook on their mobility must be anchored in a broader context because it contributes to decisions to migrate as well as ensuing migratory practices. Drawing also on the Logics of Action approach developed by Annette Jünemann et al. (2014), we explore migrants' subjective viewpoint on the various forms of violence underwent throughout the journey and the subject positions that are adopted given the social context in which they are.

It follows that we are interested in uncovering the contextual variables that enable migrants to express their agency. We do not conceive of migrants as unconscious elements of migration “waves” and “flows” passively channeled by human traffickers and state migration management regimes. On the contrary, we consider migrants as conscious individuals with will and intent. Migrants are actors who shape as much as they are shaped by the political spaces in and through which they move. By acknowledging migrants’ agency, we want to review the aforementioned problematic assumptions underlying the hegemonic discourse on migration and governmental policies. Thus, our research has significant implications for the current Common European Asylum System (CEAS), the EU efforts of externalizing its migration policies and border control, and the modalities of coping with the incoming of migrants in European societies. Drawing on interview-based empirical research in Germany and in other European migrant-receiving countries, we will examine migrants’ narratives to achieve the following goals:

- (i) Enrich academic knowledge with migrants’ subjectivities and voices
- (ii) Objectify and update the general public discourse on migration
- (iii) Change the grammar of migration in order to contribute to the formulation of more appropriate policies and regulations

The project is embedded in joint activities of a new research network in Hamburg on Forced Migration (GIGA, IFSH, Uni HH).

Panels and Workshops:

Panel in cooperation with Julia Simon (HSU) on ‘Borders and Boundaries in the Euro-Mediterranean Space’, 11th Pan-European Conference on International Relations in Barcelona, September 2017.

Workshop in cooperation with the German Institute for Global and Area Studies (GIGA) on ‘the conceptualization of Migrants’ Agency’, Helmut Schmidt University, Hamburg, December 2017.

Double-panel in cooperation with the German Institute for Global and Area Studies (GIGA) on ‘The Migration-Violence Nexus: Comparative lessons from the Middle East’ and ‘Researchers und Migrants: Opening a Critical Discussion on their Relationship Status’, World Congress for Middle Eastern Studies (WOCMES). Seville, July 2018

Latest Publications:

Annette Jünemann: Emotions matter. Fear and (non-)empathy in German reactions to the “refugee crisis” In: Annette Jünemann, Nicolas Fromm, Nikolas Scherer (eds.): *Fortress Europe? Challenges and failures of migration and asylum policies*, VS-Springer 2017, S. 167-184.

Annette Jünemann: From pity to social empathy: Overcoming asymmetries in the relationship between refugees and their volunteer supporters. To be published in *Forced Migration Review* (in review process).

Hamza Safouane: Manufacturing Striated Space for Migrants. An Ethnography of Initial Reception Centers for Asylum Seekers in Germany. In *Voluntas, International Journal of Voluntary and Nonprofit Organizations*, 2016, 27 (6)