PACES

Making migration and migration policy decisions
amidst societal transformations

Changing the Migration Narrative

On the Power of Discourse, Propaganda and Truth Distortion

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PACES (Making migration and migration policy decisions amidst societal transformation) is a 40-month research project (2023-2026) that examines decisions to stay and migrate over time and space, researches the politics of knowledge in migration policy and seeks to use its insights to inform future migration policies and governance. PACES is carried out by a consortium of 14 partners in Europe, Africa and the USA.

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Abstract

Despite huge improvement in data and research on migration, most scientific knowledge about migration is ignored in polarized public debates about migration. Migration policies are frequently ineffective or backfire, because they are not based on a scientific understanding of the nature, causes and consequences of migration. 'Talking truth to power' will not solve this problem, because politicians, international organizations, and mass media routinely ignore evidence that challenges dominant narratives or actively distort the truth about migration. Four narratives dominate public debates: the (1) Mass Migration Narrative, the (2) Migration Threat Narrative, the (3) Migrant Victim Narrative and the (4) Migration Celebration Narrative. These powerful narratives are one-sided, misrepresent the true nature of migration, and largely disregard migrant agency. This reveals the need for researchers to communicate their insights directly to the general public based on a long-term vision of migration as an intrinsic part of global change and development instead of a priori as a 'problem to be solved' or a 'solution to problems'. The goal should not be to prescribe a particular policy agenda, but to equip the largest possible audiences with knowledge that will enable them to critically scrutinize claims made by politicians, pundits, and interest groups, and see through the various forms of misinformation and propaganda that abound on this subject.

Keywords: migration policy, migration narratives, public engagement

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1. Introduction

As migration researchers know all too well, many 'truths' politicians, mass media and various interest groups spread about migration are based on misguided assumptions or 'myths' rather than on facts and scientific evidence. From this, it would be tempting to think that all that is therefore needed is that researchers 'inform' decision makers about the facts, so that we can avoid the errors of the past, and develop better, 'evidence-based' policies. However, as I argue in my recent book *How Migration Really Works*, the idea that all we need is to 'enlighten' policy makers seems naïve, because the latter are often constrained by the interests, ideologies and agendas of governments and organizations. Politicians often ignore evidence or may even actively distort the truth about migration, for instance through migrant scapegoating or migration fearmongering (de Haas 2023).

From that perspective, the various misperceptions, biased perspectives, and myths that politicians, interest groups and international organizations frequently spread about migration – and that the mass media often uncritically amplify and recycle – do generally not come 'out of the blue', but reflect institutional agendas, political ideologies, or electoral strategies. To a large degree, these interests explain the striking tenacity of various misperceptions about migration despite evidence from the field of migration studies that challenge, or contradict, such ideas. Lack of knowledge certainly plays a role, but deliberate ignorance of inconvenient facts is also a crucial factor explaining why certain types of (inconvenient) evidence do neither 'reach' political debates nor inform policy making.

Migration policies frequently fail to meet their objectives, or can even be counterproductive, partly because they are not based on a sound knowledge of the nature and causes of migration processes and don't foresee various, often unintended, consequences that undermine the policy objective. This reflects a more general lack of scientific grounding of migration debates. What is particularly lacking is a holistic understanding of migration as an intrinsic part of broader processes of economic change and social transformation in destination and origin countries.

Typically, 'policy relevant' research often produces narrow, short-term answers to limited, short-term questions, which subsequently then contribute to the development of inappropriate policies (Castles 2003). One notable example of good (or bad) intentions gone awry is the ways in which border restrictions (both in the US and the EU) since the 1990s have paradoxically *accelerated* the growth of permanently settled migrant communities, essentially because they unintendedly interrupted migratory circulation by pushing temporary workers into permanent settlement, which subsequently triggered large-scale family reunion, and partly drove migration underground.

Another example is the failure of anti-smuggling crackdowns to stop illegal migration, principally because they were based on the misguided presumption that migrant smuggling is the cause of illegal migration, while, in reality, border controls *create* a market for smuggling services amongst prospective migrant workers and asylum seekers. So, the policy failed on its own terms – in many

ways, it was bound to fail as it is among the very causes of the phenomenon it pretends to 'combat' (Castles 2004; Massey et al. 2016; de Haas et al. 2019).

However, we generally don't see that policy makers have used such evidence to change their policies to make them more effective. Instead, politicians often recycle the same failed policies of the past. This begs the question: why is research evidence often not taken on board to improve policy? There is no simple answer to that question.

Partly, politicians and other decision-makers may simply not be aware of the evidence, and researchers should therefore not give up efforts to communicate their insights to the powers that be. To some extent, this can be explained by cognitive dissonance – a common, largely unconscious, psychological reaction when established, deeply rooted belief systems are challenged. However, this frequently also reflects a more deliberate neglect of inconvenient facts that would disturb dominant migration narratives and propaganda spread by politicians, pressure groups and international organisations (de Haas 2023).

This paper explains why evidence from research are often ignored in policy making and suggests how researchers can make themselves heard in migration debates. In the following section, I discuss the problems of 'policy-relevant' research and call for more 'policy irrelevant' research. Subsequently, I identify the broad range of actors and interest groups producing one-sided, distorted views on migration. Section 4 outlines the four dominant narratives that dominate public debates about migration. In section 5, I argue that these narratives are combined into a more overarching migration discourse that dominates public debates on the national and global level. I then show how these narratives misrepresent the nature and causes of migration and largely disregard migrant agency. In the final sections, I argue that migration researchers need to build their own migration narratives and spread these to wider audiences in order to challenge and move beyond the dominant migration discourse.

2. Establishment academia and the reproduction of state perspectives

It is common to think that we need more data and research so that migration policies will be based on better evidence. However, once we understand how powerful ideologies and discourses actively distort the truth, it seems rather naïve to think that all migration researchers need to do is get out there to enlighten and convince politicians and other 'policy makers' about how things really are, so that they can make better, evidence-based policies. Edward Said has argued that 'speaking truth to power' should be the true vocation of intellectuals (Said 1994). In this context, Said argued that the biggest danger for intellectuals is to cuddle up too cosily to powerful elites, to start speaking their jargon and – consciously or subconsciously – taking over their worldviews. Hence, Said's fierce critique on what he called 'establishment academics.'

Such critique corroborates the importance of independent academic research and the need to keep a healthy distance from governments, business, organisations, and interest groups, in terms of funding, influence and setting research agendas. This is an important point, migration studies is one of those research fields that is often 'too close' to policy, as migration research is often funded by governments, international organisations and interest groups. The concomitant lack of sufficient intellectual distance from the world of power and money is continuing to bias research – if only because of the kind of questions that are deemed relevant and the kind of research that gets funded.

As a result, migration research often closely follows political preoccupations. This is for instance visible in the 'receiving country bias' in migration research – this the tendency to mainly view migration from the perspective of Western 'destination societies' and, more specifically, the preoccupation of Western states with controlling and regulating migration. This also biases the organizations Western states fund and dominate and the discourses and narratives these organisations subsequently produce. This is for instance reflected in IOM's tagline message of "promoting humane and *orderly* migration" (emphasis by author).

As such, there is nothing inherently wrong with the desire of states and international organisations to regulate migration and to prevent abuses and suffering amongst vulnerable groups of refugees and other migrants. However, it biases narratives and research heavily towards the perspective of destination states, and insufficiently towards understanding migration from the perspectives of migrants themselves as well as from the perspectives of societies of origin. More in general, the focus on 'policy' and 'impacts' has long gone along with a lack of fundamental research into the migration process itself, and how this process is part of much broader processes of economic change and social transformation in origin and destination societies. The dearth of research on migration processes reflects a preoccupation with the (1) impacts of migration for (2) *destination* societies.

This perpetuates common-sensical, misguided understandings in public and academic discourse about the 'root causes' of migration often based on assumption rather than facts. These largely draw (implicitly or explicitly) on 'push-pull' models that conceptualize migration as a more or less automated, linear response to geographical income disparities or other opportunity gaps. It is also associated to one-sided portrayals of migration as a flight from poverty, violence and other forms of human misery in origin countries. This is linked to the dominant political framing of 'South-North' migration essentially as a 'problem to be solved'.

This contrast with a scientific, non-ideological view that tries to understand migration as a constituent, and therefore inseparable, part of much broader processes of social transformation and economic development. For instance, it is impossible to understand and even conceptualize the experience of urbanisation in industrializing societies without taking into account rural-to-urban (internal) migration, vice versa. Both processes are fundamentally interdependent on each other, or intrinsically woven, which somehow defies conceptualizing urbanization as a causal 'determinant' of migration. In fact, they are both part of much bigger transformation processes – the shift from rural-agrarian to urban-industrial societies.

The dominance of the top-down perspective of the destination state also goes along with the tendency to ignore or deny the role of migrant agency. For instance, the dominant framing of much 'South-North' migration as a "desperate flight from misery" is one-sided as it fails to see how migration is an often rather deliberate investment in the long-term well-being of families that requires significant resources. It is also challenged by evidence that internal (rural-to-urban) migration as well as international emigration tends to increase in volume and geographical reach as poor countries become richer (Clemens 2020; de Haas 2010a, 2021; Schewel 2020), essentially because 'development' in the form of poverty reduction, increasing education and better infrastructure tend to simultaneously increase people's aspirations and capabilities to migrate.

The continued emphasis of political discourses on the alleged 'poverty push' alongside violent conflict as the main 'root cause' of migration also goes along with a striking lack of academic studies that systematically map how labour demand and recruitment in destination countries have continued to play a central role in driving migration from 'South' to 'North'. In many ways, the central role of destination country labour demand (and recruitment) in driving growing migration to Western countries, which was already extensively mapped by prominent migration scholars like Michael Piore (1978) and Stephen Castles (Castles 1986; Castles and Kosack 1973) in the 1970s and the 1980s seems to have largely dropped off research agendas of migration researchers across the social sciences. This is particularly striking compared to the many bookshelves that have been filled with studies on immigration policy and migrant integration.

So, the closeness of migration research to policy and political debate is not necessarily a blessing; it can actually become a curse. As Oliver Bakewell (2008) has argued in the context of research on forced migration, the search for policy relevance has encouraged refugee researchers to adopt the categories, concepts and priorities of policy makers and practitioners as their initial frame of reference for identifying their areas of study and formulating research questions. This tends to privilege the worldview of policy makers and powerful institutions funding research by strongly biasing the questions asked, the objects of study as well as methodologies and analyses.

According to Bakewell, this "leaves large groups of forced migrants invisible in both research and policy", such as, in the case of his research, self-settled Angolan refugees in Zambia that don't fit formal (UNHCR) refugee definitions and bureaucratic categories. According to Bakewell, academic researchers have therefore "generated volumes of advice to UNHCR about how to improve its policy in Africa but far less understanding of what people actually do when they flee violence" (Bakewell 2008, 450). Hence, Bakewell's plea for "the importance of policy irrelevant research".

More in general, being 'too policy-relevant' also seems to perpetuate a Euro- and Western-centric bias in migration research, and particularly the political agendas of Western governments and the international organizations (such as IOM) they tend to fund and whose agendas they therefore dominate. All of this is not to question the individual commitment, dedication and honesty of researchers, or the good intentions of many policy makers and the institutions they represent. It's rather about acknowledging the severe constraints the interests and ideologies of states and powerful organisations continue to impose on the autonomy of academics in setting research agendas.

3. The delusion of 'talking truth to power'

Section 2 highlights the importance of independent academic research, and the inherent dangers of 'soft money' dominating knowledge production. Fortunately, over the past few decades, an impressive body of independent academic research on the nature, causes and impacts of the highest scientific standard has been generated. There is an increasingly robust 'migration science,' with valuable contributions from across the social sciences and beyond, from anthropology to economics, from historical sciences to geography, and from sociology to political science and legal studies.

Still, despite such progress, insights from research are commonly ignored in the policy field whenever they would upset convenient truths. Once we understand how the political economy of knowledge production continues to be dominated by (the interests of) Western states, the international organizations they fund and corporate media that largely reproduce their narratives, ideologies and worldviews, the whole idea that politicians and powerful organization are ready (and willing) to be enlightened by scientific evidence becomes rather naïve. As Noam Chomsky has argued, "talking truth to power" is often a rather pointless exercise, because "they know it already" (Chomsky 2010).

In fact, from Chomsky's point of view, the ruling classes (mainstream politicians, big business and the corporate media) are often busy concealing the truth and filtering out all evidence that would challenge their position and the official narratives they spread and recycle with the goal to reinforce belief systems. As a consequence, they ignore, surpass or even ridicule all evidence that would threaten their discourses.

As a result, inconvenient facts and evidence that don't fit within dominant political discourse on immigration are ignored. From this perspective, the point is not that "they don't know", but that inconvenient evidence – or policy recommendations – are ignored or even actively suppressed, for instance by pressuring researchers to change the substance or style of their written outputs, or by not publishing studies that they have commissioned that come to 'wrong' conclusions.

In other words, just spreading 'facts' or 'myth busting' alone won't do the job. A whole range of biased perspectives and misguided assumptions about migration persist not so much because of a 'lack of knowledge', but rather as part of institutional agenda setting, institutional interests or, in the political sphere, more deliberate strategies to distort the facts that regularly come down to plain propaganda. This is not only about politicians indulging in familiar migration fearmongering and belligerent rhetoric for electoral gain, recycling well-rehearsed mantras to 'secure our borders', 'combat' illegal migration and to viciously 'crack down' on smugglers and traffickers. It's also not only about politicians who scapegoat migrants and asylum seekers for problems like declining job security, wage stagnation, the lack of affordable housing and healthcare.

It is also about interest groups like trade unions and business lobbies that exaggerate the harms – or benefits – of migration. It's also about UN agencies like the International Organization for Migration

(IOM), United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) emphasizing and exaggerating 'highest ever' increases in migrant and refugee numbers in an apparent bid to generate publicity and funding (Fransen and de Haas 2022). It is also about corporate lobbies portraying migrants as heroes that will stimulate innovation and ensure nations retain their competitiveness in the global race for talent (Cerna and Czaika 2021), or pro-immigration groups unrealistically presenting migration as a fix to ageing problems or engines of innovation. Or development agencies portraying a 'brain drain' as a major cause of development problems, such as a failure of health care provisions in origin countries (Clemens 2007; Mendy 2018) or promoting poverty reduction and development in origin countries as a 'smart solution' to address the 'root causes' of migration (de Haas 2010b).

It is also about humanitarian organizations denying the ability of migrants and refugees to think for themselves and act in their own best interests, by unilaterally depicting them as victims who needed to be 'rescued' from smugglers and traffickers (Parreñas 2006; Sanchez 2017). Or climate activists and think tanks hijacking the migration issue and fabricating myths about huge waves of climate refugees to help make their (otherwise justified) case for drastically cutting greenhouse-gas emissions (de Haas 2023).

4. Dominant migration narratives

Migration myths are constantly advocated and recycled, not because their proponents necessarily believe them, but primarily because they serve powerful interests and political agendas.

Importantly, misconceptions of migration, or 'migration myths' do not stand on their own, but are the building blocks of more general stories, or narratives, that the public are being told about immigration. These narratives portray migration either as a threat or a solution, or they depict particular groups of migrants alternatively as heroes, victims or villains. By their very nature, such migration narratives are simplistic and biased because they serve particular interests, usually in the form of attracting voters, political support, or funding. In order to be convincing, such storylines need to resonate with people's real concerns, emotions and fears and sound internally coherent.

To achieve such coherence, politicians, interest groups and the media tend to cherry-pick facts, leaving in what is convenient, and leaving out what is inconvenient, deliberately not telling the full story or manipulating data to fit their migration narratives. As these stories are being told again and again, until at some point they become conventional wisdoms, self-evidential and self-referential 'truths.' One example is the much-recycled idea that climate change will lead to the mass displacement of hundreds of millions, or even over a billion migrants. Although there is no evidence to back up any of such claims (Gemenne 2011), they have become part of what many people genuinely believe 'must' be true, if only because such ideas often sound very intuitively right. Although such truth distortion certainly happens in other domains of knowledge as well, in migration it seems particularly strong, as misrepresentations of migration are often a central element of electoral and institutional strategies.

In essence, such narratives are part of belief systems. As a result, their adherents therefore tend to reject or ignore any information that creates discomfort, because it distorts our established worldviews. Evidence that would undermine these storylines and expose their biased, and frequently manipulative, nature, and expose the interests behind them, as well as the sloppy assumptions and myths on which they are based, is ignored and, as a consequence, the truth continues to be actively distorted. Four narratives have come to dominate the way the migration story is currently being told to the public by politicians, media, interest groups and international organisations: the Mass Migration Narrative, the Migration Threat Narrative, the Migrant Victim Narrative and the Migration Celebration Narrative.

4.1 The mass migration narrative

The Mass Migration Narrative is arguably the most powerful of all four migration narratives. It directly resonates with deep-seated fears that global migration is spinning out of control because of a series of crises. The Mass Migration Narrative is not about the impacts of migration, but rather on the nature and causes of migration. This narrative receives broad support from across the left-right political spectrum, humanitarian organizations and the media and has therefore reached the status of a near-universal consensus. Here, the dominant narrative conveyed by politicians on the left and right, pundits/experts, journalists and major international organisations is that international migration is increasing fast as a result of a combination of factors, such as poverty, warfare, inequality, population growth and climate change.

This has amalgamated in an overall image of South-North migration essentially being a process of people desperately fleeing various sorts of 'human misery'. At the same time, the forces of globalization and access to biased information and rosy images about life in the West would encourage more and more people to migrate. These forces would fuel increasing 'migration pressures' and a growing 'exodus' from South to North (Collier 2013), the results of which we would witness in increasingly desperate attempts of Central Americans to migrate to the US and of the many people dying in the Mediterranean Sea. Fuelled by media reporting and political discourses, the Mass Migration Narrative is also linked to a perception that 'South-North' migration is increasingly about illegal migration that is allegedly 'spinning out of control'.

In terms of vocabulary, a typical feature of the Mass Migration Narrative is the use of apocalyptical language and 'water metaphors' such as 'waves', 'tides' or even 'tsunamis' which convey a perception that contemporary migration is about increasingly massive population movements, evoking 'biblical' images of the collective uprooting and displacement of entire peoples. Continuing the water analogies, in the German and Dutch language, border controls are frequently framed as efforts to 'dam in' migration flows to prevent destination societies from being 'swamped'. The Mass Migration Narrative also goes along with the frequent use of hydraulic Malthusian terminology like 'population pressure', 'migration pressures' or 'absorption capacity' (Sayad 1999).

The use of such metaphors is very effective in perpetuating the Mass Migration Narrative on a largely unconscious level. Depending on political preferences and interests, the proposed solution to prevent mass migration from further getting out of hand differ a lot, ranging from reinforcing border controls (perhaps more popular on the right) to conflict prevention and boosting development in origin countries (perhaps more popular on the left). Despite such differences in imagined 'solutions', the underlying assumption that we are facing an imminent mass migration crisis that needs urgent addressing is strikingly similar.

4.2 The migration threat narrative

The Migration Threat Narrative, which is often combined with the Mass Migration Narrative, portrays migrants as potential job thieves, welfare scroungers and criminals, and immigration more generally as an essential threat to employment, wages and welfare provisions including access to affordable housing, education and health care. Such fears are particularly projected on lower skilled migrants and refugees from culturally distinct countries, in narratives where race and class often intersect strongly. The argument that (an increasingly massive and out-of-control) migration is a threat to wages, employment and labour standards has always been popular on the left and right. At least until recently, this claim has also been a classic stock of trade union discourse that saw the recruitment of migrant workers as an instrument used by capitalists to break the power of organized labour and to divide the working classes. A related anti-migration argument from the perspective of origin countries sees migration as the culprit of underdevelopment there as the 'brain drain' would stymie growth and development through the constant haemorrhaging of their most talented, energetic and productive members.

Since the end of the Cold War, when the perceived threat of Communism and nuclear war fell away, Western politicians have increasingly started to include the fear of mass immigration in their narratives, often casting refugees as potential bogus asylum seekers and benefit tourists, and the arrival of low skilled workers and their families as a menace to the welfare state (de Haas 2023). Particularly since the terrorist attacks of September 2001, far-right groups as well as populist politicians have switched the Migration Threat Narratives into a higher gear by portraying immigrants and minorities not only as job thieves, welfare scroungers or benefit tourists, but also as religious fanatics and terrorists plotting to 'Islamize' the West, replace their population and bring down Western civilization (Lucassen 2022).

Traditionally associated with far-right, white supremacist and extreme nativist groups, these narratives, appealing to deep fears about migration as a cultural threat, have started to gain currency among mainstream parties, culturally conservative politicians and experts in the US, the UK and continental Europe, according to whom 'mass immigration' is leading to 'too much diversity', putting social cohesion under pressure and exceeding the 'absorption capacity' of destination societies. The Migration Threat Narrative is particularly applied to lower skilled migrants and refugees from 'non-Western' countries. Although higher skilled migrants are often more welcome, their immigration has also frequently been portrayed as a threat by populist politicians on the left and right, such as the

alleged role of 'expats' in driving up house prices, crowding out native workers, changing and gentrifying neighbourhoods as well as their alleged refusal to learn local languages, build social ties and adapt to local customs.

4.3 The migrant victim narrative

The Migrant Victim Narrative is related to – and reinforces – the first two narratives, and the Mass Migration Narrative in particular. This narrative is particularly popular amongst left-wing politicians but can also frequently be heard in the narratives produced by international organizations such as the International Organization for Migration (IOM), the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), as well as anti-trafficking and other humanitarian organizations and trade unions. The Migrant Victim Narrative portrays migrants and refugees as victims of 'unscrupulous' and 'merciless' smugglers, traffickers and 'exploitative' employers that treat them like 'modern slaves.' The Migrant Victim Narrative tends to represent (organized) crime and deceit as the principal cause of 'South-North' migration. It feeds into a stereotypical image of migrants and refugees being tricked or rounded up by smugglers and traffickers who force them to make perilous journeys, subject them to severe abuse and, once having reached the destination, force them to work in slavery-like situations.

With regards to forced migration as well as other forms of 'precarious migration', refugee status determination processes are usually built on a set of stereotypical assumptions about how a forced migrant should behave – generating pressure to perform according to a certain script of 'victimcy' to avoid deportation, destitution or even death (Bakewell 2021; Sigona 2014; Utas 2005). Similar victimhood narratives persist around human smuggling, and particularly trafficking.

This narrative feeds into the policy idea that we can 'solve' these problems if we rescue migrants and refugees from the stranglehold of smugglers and traffickers. Within this perspective, 'solving' problems like illegal migration, smuggling and trafficking becomes tantamount to law enforcement and crime fighting – and this is how politicians and organisations like UNODC, Frontex and anti-trafficking NGOs producing such narratives frame the issue, quite similar to the ways politicians also cast the 'War on Drugs' or the 'War on Terror'. This approach is particularly reflected in the frequent use of belligerent terminology like 'fighting', 'combating' and 'cracking down' on illegal migration. In this view, viciously cracking down on smugglers, traffickers and employers employing illegal workers are the only way to stop the ruthless exploitation of workers and to liberate victims of trafficking.

A second type of 'solution' conveyed by this narrative are information campaigns that aim to prevent migration by informing prospective migrants about the dangers of the journey and the difficult life abroad (Pécoud 2010). A third type of solution are programmes that link the involuntary return and deportation of migrants to development projects in origin countries so that returnees can be 'helped to stay', for instance by helping them to set up a farm or small enterprise (Pian 2010). In the case of refugees, another variation on the same theme is the plea for 'regional solutions.' This boils down to support for projects creating facilities for the hosting and economic integration of refugees in regions

of origin, based on the believe that they will then no longer see the need to claim asylum in Western countries, and will therefore no longer take the costs, suffering and risk associated with smuggling and long overseas journeys or perilous treks through jungles and deserts.

4.4 The migration celebration narrative

On the other end of the spectrum, proponents of the Migration Celebration Narrative turn the arguments of previous narratives more or less on their head by putting their hopes on migration to address various problems such as labour shortages, economic stagnation and population ageing. This narrative casts migrants as beacons of hope who revitalize societies and boost growth, innovation and trade. It also sees refugees as a potential workforce that should be given full rights so they can deploy their talents and contribute to growth and innovation. In this view, diversity is a good thing, as it sparks innovation. Migration enthusiasts adhering to the Migration Celebration Narrative counter the brain drain argument by claiming that migration boosts growth in poorer countries because of the hundreds of billions of dollars that migrants send back in the form of remittances and a 'brain gain' through the vital role of migrants in stimulating trade and boosting investment and entrepreneurship in origin countries.

The Migration Celebration Narrative is the counter-narrative to the Migration Threat Narrative. It is particularly popular amongst liberal (and libertarian) politicians and pro-business thinktanks arguing that we 'need' immigrants, and amongst economists and organizations like the World Bank that argue freer migration will boost productivity and wealth in poor countries. The World Bank has succinctly voiced this belief as follows:

> *"The rich have many assets; the poor have only one – their labour. Because good jobs are slow to come to the poor, the poor must move to find productive employment. Migration is, therefore, the most effective way to reduce poverty and share prosperity, the twin goals of the World Bank"* (World Bank 2018).

The Migration Celebration Narrative has long dominated public narrative and ideology in traditional immigration countries such as the US, Canada, Australia and New Zealand. In addition, various humanitarian and religious groups have favoured the generous reception of refugees out of solidary, human rights and faith principles while liberal politicians have celebrated the cultural diversity immigration brings as well as the contribution of migrants and refugees to economic growth and innovation. This can create 'strange bedfellow' coalitions between business lobbies, left-wing groups and humanitarian NGOs all arguing in favour of open borders.

The Migration Celebration Narrative is also frequently told about people fleeing politically hostile regimes, which has historically been the case with Cuban or, more recently, Iranian refugees to the US, people fleeing the Communist Eastern Block to Western Europe during the Cold War or, more in our times, Ukrainians fleeing Russian aggression. Such refugees are often received as heroes (or as 'deserving' victims) and offered quite different treatment compared to other refugees who tend to get a much colder, more suspicious or hostile reception both in discourse and in practice.

5. An overarching discourse: The new migration consensus

Politicians, interest groups and international organisations tend to subscribe to one or, usually, several of these narratives. The Mass Migration Narrative is by far the most widely shared narrative told by politicians, interest groups and media across the ideological spectrum. Humanitarian organizations usually adhere to the Migrant Victim Narrative, sometimes combined with the Mass Migration Narrative. Conservative, nationalistic groups and sometimes also trade unions have regularly bought into different varieties of the Migration Threat Narrative. Far-right politicians usually combine this with narratives that cast minority groups as either inferior or as an essential threat, or both. Liberal politicians, pro-business groups, economists, many academics, and 'open border' activists often adhere to the Migration Celebration Narrative.

In practice, however, politicians and international organisations not only buy into one of these narratives but combine elements of them to create a more overarching, superficially coherent, but empirically unfounded, migration discourse. Although the Migration Celebration Narratives seem largely contradictory to the Migration Threat Narrative, politicians seem to have increasingly combined these pro- and anti-immigration narratives by applying different narratives to different groups of migrants, refugees included. While they usually reserve the Mass Migration, Migration Threat and Migrant Victim Narratives to officially 'unwanted' groups of lower-skilled workers and asylum seekers, they have often selectively applied the Migration Celebration Narrative to higher-skilled migrant workers as well as investors, students and 'high potential' refugees who they represented as contributing to innovation, economic growth and a 'solution' to the problems of ageing societies.

In recent decades, at the intersection of race and class, the discursive distinction between the officially undesired 'low-skilled', 'non-Western' migrants and the desired 'high-skilled' workers of the 'expat' type (also applied to 'non-Western', particularly Asian migrants) has become a typical feature of migration discourse. At least until the 1990s, many West-European countries were still in a state of denial about the fact of having become immigration societies.

As this was never planned or politically desired, it was often experienced as something that caught societies by surprise, that overwhelmed them and that should be stopped. For decades, German politicians have clung on to guestworker illusions by repeating the 'we are not an immigration country' mantra, while several French politicians promised 'zero immigration'. Britain, too, largely became an immigration country 'by accident' in the wake of decolonization. For long it was thought immigration would go down once the wave of post-colonial immigration had subsided and guestworker recruitment was suspended after the Oil Crisis (Castles and Kosack 1973; Castles 1986).

A few decades later, few politicians would make such claims in the face of the reality of large-scale immigration and settlement that had clearly undermined the credibility of 'zero immigration' mantras. Particularly when the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 heralded an era of economic liberalism and globalization, and renewed economic growth increased labour demand after the recessions and mass unemployment of the 1970s and 1980s, this narrative was no longer tenable, and gave way to a new dominant discourse that portrayed some forms of immigration as desirable and other forms of migration – lower skilled workers and asylum migration in particular – as a problem in need of solving. This distinction between 'good' and 'bad' migrants also became a central feature of migration discourse in classic immigration societies such as the United States and Australia.

While politicians have increasingly celebrated the archetypical high-skilled immigrant as an asset in the 'global race for talent', they portrayed the immigration of the lower-skilled, poor and foreign other as a potential threat to Western welfare states, social cohesion, identity and even security of destination countries. This went along with a frequent denial that the demand for such workers persisted, and even increased, particularly in sectors like agriculture, construction transport and a whole range of services including care, cleaning and hospitality. The mismatch between this demand and legal migration channels drove part of this migration underground, leading to a partial 'illegalization' of the lower skilled work forces.

Behind the harsh discourse vilifying these migrants, their labour serves economic interests, social needs (particularly in personal care), is highly convenient and therefore largely tolerated. This de facto toleration is corroborated by near-absence of effective workplace enforcement with regards to illegal labour. For instance, in the US prosecutions for employers hiring undocumented migrants have rarely exceeded 15-20 per year, with fewer than five a year seeing actual jail time (de Haas 2023, 258). In the UK and many other Western countries, too, enforcement rates tend to be largely symbolical. In practice, after all, there doesn't seem to be a real willingness to deprive employers of this convenient source of foreign workers who are willing to work hard for low wages and are unlikely to join trade unions or engage in other forms of resistance against economic exploitation.

Therefore, the narrative casting them as 'illegal migrants' who have 'no jobs to come to' (de Haas 2023, 109) and as potential welfare scroungers and criminals seems to function as a discursive means to justify their exploitation and denial of basic rights. From a Marxist perspective, the sowing of suspicion or hatred towards migrants and the racialized 'other' is an effective key strategy to divide the working classes (Castles and Kosack 1973). Within this reasoning, the Mass Migration and Migration Threat Narratives serve to sustain a form of false class consciousness, essentially by making native workers believe that migrant workers are the cause of problems such as declining job security, wage stagnation, the lack of affordable housing and healthcare and the erosion of welfare, instead of decades of government policies focused on austerity, privatization and deregulation.

In this way, governments and international organisations have constructed a discursive dichotomy between 'orderly', legal and officially desired migration on the one hand and presumably 'disorderly', illegal and officially undesired (but largely tolerated) migration. While Western mainstream politicians have increasingly shied away from using explicitly racist discourse or whites-only immigration policies, they have increasingly selected immigrants on class markers such as education, skills and income, with

middle- and higher-class migrants generally getting preferential treatment, and lower-class immigrants being increasingly relegated to occupy unattractive jobs, often in informal sectors, and possessing either insecure or undocumented migration status. However, class markers often still continue to conceal ethnic and racist prejudice against certain migrants framed as not 'fitting' into Western societies and cultures and therefore potentially posing an 'integration problem'.

Based on this discursive distinction between desired and undesired forms of migration, a New Migration Consensus has evolved over the past decades. A first component of this consensus is that the immigration of lower skilled workers and asylum seekers should be limited as much as possible to avoid problems of marginalization, unemployment and segregation, as this would undermine wages, employment and welfare of native workers. This goes along with the believe that current levels of 'mass' immigration exceed the 'absorption' capacity of host societies and potentially undermine social cohesion. At best, lower skilled workers should be allowed in as temporary workers and their permanent settlement should be avoided as much as possible to avoid repeating the perceived errors of the past that led to large-scale settlement of Mexican workers in the US, South Asian and East European workers in the UK, and Turkish and North African workers in continental Europe.

A second component of this New Migration Consensus is that limited numbers of asylum seekers can be welcomed to uphold a minimum compliance with humanitarian principles, but that their unsolicited arrivals at the border of the Wealthy West should be avoided. Preferred policy interventions should therefore focus on 'providing regional solutions' so that asylum seekers can build a new future in neighbouring countries as well as on 'tough but fair' processing of asylum applications as well as the imprisonment and deportation of rejected asylum seekers. According to this consensus, such selection should preferably happen in regions of origin, through the identification of 'high potential' refugees for resettlement in destination countries. Their spontaneous arrival at the border should be avoided as much as possible through border enforcement and 'migration deals' with countries of transit such as Mexico, Morocco, Tunisia, or Turkey or through signing deals with countries like Rwanda for the extra-territorial processing of asylum applications.

The third component of the New Migration Consensus is that, in contrast to lower-skilled workers and most asylum seekers, higher-skilled migrants are welcome because they are an essential asset for stimulating innovation, investment and growth. According to this consensus, countries are involved in a 'global race' for talent and should therefore do everything to attract the highly skilled by giving them fast-track access to visas, tax incentives and other benefits. This groups of 'desired' migrants includes fee-paying foreign students, who besides providing income for higher education (which is particularly important in the US and the UK), are seen as ideal future members of the labour force. In political discourse, skills and training (often reflecting class positions) seem to have increasingly superseded race as a selection criterion. While Nigerian doctors and Filipino nurses are often welcome, lower skilled workers from the same countries are officially discouraged from coming. However, in practice, severe discrimination also of such higher skilled groups remains common, for instance in the recognition of their qualifications, contractual conditions and pay while the temporary nature of their

immigration is also facilitating their exploitation, often under the false pretence of preventing 'brain drain' (Mendy 2015).

In making this distinction between 'good' or 'desired' and 'bad' or 'undesired' forms of immigration, the New Migration Consensus applies the Migration Celebration Narrative to the high-skilled workers, while drawing on a combination of the Mass Migration Narrative, the Migration Threat Narrative and the Migrant Victim Narrative when talking to the immigration of lower skilled workers and asylum seekers, particularly when they are perceived as 'non-Western', which is predominantly seen as a problem in need of 'solving'.

6. Knowledge and power: An inconvenient truth

The four dominant migration narratives as well as the overarching discourse of the new migration consensus are not based on scientific inquiry, but have their origins in the powerful political, governmental and media systems that have produced them and are constantly recycled through political speeches, reporting and documentaries. These migration narratives are part of a larger migration discourse of the New Migration Consensus, which, in a Foucauldian sense, reflects larger political and social systems that produce knowledge and meaning, and that often determine what 'truth' is and how we see the world (Foucault 1969).

From this perspective, these migration narratives are not constructed out of a prime desire to know the truth (or, if we believe there is no such thing as an objective truth, a desire to make our views less biased and grounded in a multitude of perspectives) but shaped by powerful institutional actors, such as Western governments, international organizations like IOM and UNHCR, migration thinktanks and other research organisations that depend on funding from governments and international organisations, as well as the corporate media.

While each of these four migration narratives may contain some elements of truth, they are strongly biased and, despite their apparent air of objectivity, they often reflect or conceal the interests and ideologies of the people and organizations advocating them to spread their particular views on migration and, by doing so, gain power, influence and funding. In order to make their storylines sound coherent and convincing, they only pick the pieces of evidence that fit their case. Evidence that would undermine these storylines and expose their biases and sloppy assumptions is systematically ignored, repressed or ridiculed, and, in this way, the truth continues to be systematically and actively distorted.

Besides misrepresenting the nature and causes of migration processes, these narratives tend to create a caricature of immigrants (as victims, heroes, or villains, depending on the storyline) that defies the more complex reality. For instance, with regards to the Migrant Victim Narrative, migrants and refugees using smuggling services are almost never only victims, because they need to overcome considerable obstacles and need strong willpower in order to bear the costs and risks usually involved in moving. Yet the images and stories of migrants dying while crossing deserts or seas, or of migrants abused and exploited by smugglers and employers, are the ones that dominate the headlines.

Without denying the realities of extreme suffering and exploitation, the problem is that such narratives typically deny human agency involved in most forms of forced and precarious migration or represent them as an irrational act. In reality, people can be victims and exert agency at the same time in an active effort to defy or overcome constraints. Most vulnerable migrant workers, including victims of trafficking, see an interest in migrating despite being exploited, if only because the alternative of staying at home was worse for them. Therefore, they avoid being 'rescued' as in practice this usually means deportation and loss of investments, income and livelihood (e.g., Costello 2015; O'Connell Davidson 2006; Weitzer 2000; Parreñas 2006). For this reason, one of the slogans of anti-anti-trafficking activists has even become 'rescue us from our rescuers' (de Haas 2023, 311).

The point is not to trivialize abuses and extreme exploitation, but that reducing migrants and refugees to passive victims is simplifying the reality. Crucially, this ignores the rather inconvenient truth that, for most of them, immigration is a rather deliberate investment into a better future, that most 'victims' have migrated out of their own will, essentially because leaving was still much more attractive than staying because of the real hope for a better future that migration represents for millions of people around the world, particularly in the form of labour opportunities and the ability to send remittances back home (Agunias 2009).

This is not to morally justify human rights abuses, or to deny states' responsibilities in upholding the rule of law and preventing exploitation by criminals and employers, but to acknowledge a lived reality in which migrants exert their agency within such severe constraints.

The implicit underlying assumption often seems to be that migrants, particularly when they are perceived as poor, uneducated and non-Western, somehow do not know what they are doing and that they would have stayed at home if only somebody had told them about the terrible circumstances in which they have ended up. On a deeper level, this seems based on often barely conscious, colonial stereotypes of non-Western people as somehow less capable of thinking, acting, or speaking for themselves (see Said 1978), or to act in their own best interests. In other words, such patronizing, condescending victimhood narratives continue to portray the non-Western and low-skilled other as 'less rational' who must be 'sensitized' and 'informed' about what is best for them: staying at home.

The Migrant Victim Narrative also seems to create a moral comfort zone to soothe the bad consciousness or guilt feelings of populations of destination societies and their leaders by imprinting a misplaced belief – that it would, in some sort of bizarre way, actually be in the migrants' own best interest if governments 1) prevent refugees from seeking safety by crossing borders, 2) arrest and deport undocumented migrant workers and 3) prevent migrants from earning a (much) higher salary abroad. From this perspective, it is in the interest of governments and politicians to distract the attention away from elements of the truth that would distort the coherent, and morally neat, self-soothing character of the discourse.

This can be seen in the rather assertive way in which politicians often claim the moral high ground (usually, after dramatic events like the sinking of a migrant boat) by vowing to put an end to the

suffering of refugees and other migrants by 'combating' illegal migration and 'destroying the business model of smugglers.' However, in reality, the very policies they advocate – stronger border enforcement – often perpetuate or even increase the dependency of migrants on smugglers as well as the risks involved in crossing borders illegally. This exposes the gap between the coherent narrative that casts migrants and refugee as 'desperate' victims of international mafias and the much 'messier' reality in which refugees and migrants actively seek the services of locally operating smugglers. Yet official narratives lead the public to believe that migrants – often inaccurately portrayed as 'trafficking victims' – were almost forced onto boats.

This is also evident in the way that dominant narratives portray 'South-North' migration as a desperate (and therefore somehow irrational) flight from poverty, violence and misery. This has created a distorted image of migration that conceals a much more complex reality in which long-distance migrants are usually not among the 'poorest of the poorest' and in which migration is usually a rather deliberate decision and an investment in the long-term wellbeing of families. Equally importantly, by portraying South-North migration as essentially resulting from poverty, violence and other forms of 'Third World misery', this discourse also systematically conceals the central role of destination country labour demand in driving much migration.

The distortion or denial of complex migration realities on the ground and the real lived experiences and motivations of migrants often leads to the type of ill-conceived policies that have failed in the past and that only perpetuate – or actually exacerbate – the very migration problems they claim to 'solve.' Awareness of this can lead to a very different interpretation of migration politics. As we have seen, the extraordinarily low levels of workplace enforcement show that, behind the narrative smokescreens, there is generally no real political willingness to 'combat' the widespread employment of undocumented migrants, as this serves vital economic interests in occupations that are often deemed 'essential' (de Haas 2023).

From this perspective, for instance, the real goal of anti-immigration narratives or border enforcement does not seem so much to stop or curb immigration (as that would deprive destination societies of a much-needed source of cheap labour), but, as Douglas Massey has argued, to give an appearance of control for electoral reasons (Massey 1999). Within this logic, tough immigration rhetoric and border crackdowns – often ineffective or even counterproductive – primarily serve as bold acts of political showmanship that conceal the true nature of immigration policies.

Tough immigration rhetoric on immigration frequently obscures the huge discursive gap between what politicians say and do (or don't do) about immigration. This is also revealed by analyses of the DEMIG POLICY migration policy databases I conducted with Katharina Natter, Simona Vezzoli and Mathias Czaika, which showed that, behind restrictive political discourse, immigration regimes (in terms of laws and rules that regulate the legal entry and stay of immigrants) have generally become more liberal over the past decades. At the same time, border enforcement and return policies have become more stringent. As most visible and concrete forms of policy, they reinforce the appearance of control – while most undocumented migrants (whether they came in through illegal border crossings or through 'overstaying' their visa) are tolerated. Further illustrating the gap between rhetoric and practice, and the significant degree of political dishonesty around migration, we found

that there are no major differences between left- and right-wing parties when it comes to the restrictiveness of the immigration policies they adopt in practice (de Haas et al 2018; Natter et al 2020).

7. Cracking the ivory tower: The need to change migration narratives

Mapping the powerful discursive coalitions propagating dominant migration narratives clarifies why spreading 'facts' won't have much effect. Because the various misconceptions (or 'myths') about migration are firmly embedded in established migration narratives advocated by states and powerful organisations, 'myth busting' can certainly be very useful to expose the shaky empirical foundations of mainstream migration narratives and policies, but it will ultimately be a pointless exercise as long as academics do not provide an alternative story or narrative about migration. This is important, as it is ultimately through telling coherent stories that we make sense of the world. In other words, 'facts' and numbers don't speak for themselves; they only become meaningful if they are part of an overall coherent narrative that helps us to truly understand what is happening – in the Weberian sense of 'Verstehen' – and that will expose the deceptive nature of the official storyline.

It is one thing to say that 'they're wrong' but academics also have the duty to tell other stories that are intuitive and convincing, are cast in ordinary, day-to-day language that eschews unnecessary jargon and that are therefore accessible for the general public. The frequent failure to do so reflects a broader 'post-modern' phenomenon, in which academics have excelled in 'deconstructing' concepts, discourses and 'grand theories' but have done poorly when it comes to 'reconstructing' by providing alternative narratives which connect with the real lived experiences and decisions of migrants as well as the real concerns and questions many people have about migration.

So far, the field of migration studies has not succeeded in providing convincing, evidence-based counter-narratives, and migration scholars have clearly failed to change the dominant migration narratives. Ultimately, this exposes the need for better theories. To some, this may sound paradoxical, because 'theory' is often associated with jargon, abstraction and obfuscation. However, good theory is practical, as it helps us to see larger patterns and structures. By its very nature, theorizing is a 'reductionist', generalizing exercise, as this is how we learn to see patterns and regularities in a messy social world. The fact that migration studies has been an 'applied' field of scientific inquiry, which in many ways remained too close to policy and politics, seems to have stood in the way of elaborating a coherent set of migration theories that could form the basis for evidence-based narratives about how migration really works.

To avoid any misunderstanding: this is not a plea for a return to naïve scientific positivism with academics adopting a position of absolute truth tellers. As such, it is vital for academic progress to constantly question our assumptions, methods and analyses. However, while migration researchers have excelled in expressing what we don't (yet) know, and stating that we need more data and funding for research, we have done poorly in expressing what we do know in clear, accessible and jargon-free language to wider audiences.

This is a pity, because the burgeoning field of migration studies has indeed accumulated an impressive body of empirical insights that deserve to be integrated and synthesized. In many ways, the migration research community can become more assertive and self-confident. In that sense, we can draw inspiration from other fields of scientific inquiry, ranging from economics, psychology, biology to climate science, where academics have been much more successful in 'popularizing' knowledge and providing alternative understandings of realities that challenge the narrative of the powerful.

For instance, the role Amartya Sen and Thomas Piketty have played in changing scientific and public debates on development and inequality, respectively, shows that we can successfully challenge the dominant narratives, on the condition that we can provide alternative, coherent and credible narratives. By its very nature, such discursive change will not happen overnight, and is a question for the long haul, as the resistance by powerful forces having an interest in the hegemony of the dominant narratives is massive, and the cognitive dissonance is huge if people are confronted with knowledge that challenges deeply rooted belief systems.

However, given the polarized nature of migration debates, which have become toxic and inflammatory, and the decades of policy failures, this is more than worth the struggle. In fact, this is more urgent than ever, as this is the only way that we can overcome polarization and achieve a more nuanced debate on immigration, which is based on facts rather than fears, and on evidence rather than opinion.

8. The need for a holistic view on migration

To overcome and counteract the distortions and biases of common migration narratives, we need a scientifically grounded paradigm on migration, one that is not only backed up by facts and data but also tells a different story about migration. Of course, there can never be an ultimate truth claim, as that would reflect an arrogant but also an intolerant, unscientific and ultimately totalitarian attitude. Rather, it would provide a general framework for analysing and understanding migration based on an urge to understand migration as it is. There is no room in a single article to develop such a new paradigm on migration, but it seems useful to sketch a few contours and assumptions on which a scientifically grounded migration paradigm could be based.

First of all, to be scientific, such a new migration paradigm needs to be *holistic*. This means that it needs to start from an understanding of migration as an intrinsic part of broader processes of economic development and social transformation in origin and destination societies, and in the world

as a whole. This perspective opposes conventional views which portray migration as either a response to economic or demographic disequilibria or a more or less automatic reaction to rather static 'push' and 'pull' factors. It also upsets ideologies and concomitant narratives that portray migration either as a 'problem to be solved' or, conversely, as a 'solution to problems.' From such a holistic perspective, the relevant question is therefore not 'why people move' (which tends to yield generic platitudes of the 'push–pull' genre, such as that people move to find better opportunities elsewhere, but which provide little insight in the structural drivers of migration processes) but, rather, how patterns and experiences of migration are shaped by broader processes of social change.

This line of thought goes back at least half a century. The geographer Ronald Skeldon already stressed the need to see migration not as the antithesis of, but as a constituent part of development (Skeldon 1997). Tellingly, Skeldon finished his book *Migration and Development* with the sentence "migration *is* development". Skeldon's argument was based on, and elaborated further, Zelinsky's earlier insights into the 'mobility transition' (Zelinsky 1971), which hypothesized that processes of social transformation (which Zelinsky called the 'vital transition'), such as urbanisation, demographic transitions, increasing education and occupational specialization, infrastructure development and modern state formation, typically lead to an increase of all types of internal and international mobility.

In recent decades, Zelinsky's and Skeldon's ideas were largely corroborated by other researchers using global migration data, which generally found a non-linear association between levels of economic and human development on the one hand, and the levels emigration: these first tend to increase and subsequently tend to decrease as countries start to attract growing numbers of migrants once they transition from middle to higher income status (Clemens 2020; de Haas 2010a). Stephen Castles (2010) also studied migration as part of broader social transformation processes.

Obviously, this fundamentally challenges dominant narratives that tend to portray migration as an outgrowth of poverty, inequality and warfare and other forms of human misery in the 'Third World'. While 'development' tends to increase the long-term emigration 'potential' of societies, the degree to which this results in large-scale international migration between countries also depends on a whole range of other historical, cultural, social and economic factors, notably destination country labour demand. If we understand migration as an intrinsic part of broader change, we not only realize that internal and international migration tends to increase as poor people become richer and societies are urbanizing, but also that societies will almost inevitably attract growing numbers of immigrants if their populations become richer and more educated – as this typically generates labour shortages in low-skilled sectors where domestic supply of people willing and able to do unattractive jobs is increasingly running dry.

To understand why this is the case, we don't have to reinvent the wheel, but should restore older intellectual traditions developed by prominent migration scholars such as Michael Piore and Stephen Castles, who emphasized the central role of labour demand and recruitment in driving most international migration. They argued that most 'great migrations' of the past century have their origin in active recruitment, even if this usually becomes largely 'invisible' (Piore 1979) as soon as network

effects kick in, and migration becomes self-perpetuating. However, without sustained labour demand, the main driver of labour mobility and associated family reunion, migration to industrialized economies would simply not continue at the scale we have seen over the past decades.

Besides providing a holistic understanding of how global migration processes are shaped by – and a constituent part of – powerful processes on the macro-level, a new paradigm on migration should also be grounded in an understanding of the lived experiences of migrants and, hence, provide a realistic account of migratory agency. To counter the Migrant Victim Narrative, empirical evidence shows the need to reconceptualize migration, not only as an act of agency that requires considerable resources (material capital), knowledge and skills (cultural or 'human' capital) and connections (social capital), but also as a resource in its own right, a livelihood strategy and deliberate investment of individuals and households in the long-term wellbeing of families (de Haas 2010b).

The aspirations-capabilities framework is an example of a theory that can help us to advance a richer understanding of migratory agency, both in terms of how macro-level processes of social transformation affect migratory agency on the micro-level, but also to understand the ways migrants actively resist and overcome structural constraints, such as immigration restrictions, racism and exclusion (Carling 2002; de Haas 2021, Schewel 2020).

Importantly, as I argued elsewhere, the aspirations-capabilities framework also allows us to distinguish between the instrumental (means-to-an-end) and intrinsic (directly wellbeing-affecting) dimensions of human mobility (de Haas 2021). This yields a vision in which moving and staying are seen as complementary manifestations of migratory agency and in which human mobility freedoms are defined as people's capability to choose where to live, including the option to stay, rather than as the act of moving or migrating itself. In this framework life aspirations are not static, but deeply affected by cultural change, education and access to information, and migration is not only a tool, but also a fundamental freedom, both in the sense of fulfilling intrinsic desires of (particularly young) people to explore the world, and a 'capability' or a resource in its own right (de Haas 2021).

This can also help us to integrate mobility and immobility into one single conceptual framework (de Haas 2021), in which the most deprived populations don't have access to migration as a means to secure and improve livelihoods, but rather remain stuck in 'involuntarily immobility' (Carling 2002). This is quite a radical departure from the 'poverty push' perspective. Again, this alternative, scientifically based understanding of migratory agency provides a fundamental reversal from the usual narrative portrayal of migration as an act of desperation and deprivation. It also shows the need to overcome the 'mobility bias' in migration research, which perhaps also reflects the political obsession with migration. In fact, the large majority of people are 'voluntarily immobile', exposing the need to explain why people do not migrate or desire to migrate (Schewel 2020).

The power of these insights generated by the aspirations-capabilities framework is that they 'make a lot of sense' as they closely connect to lived experiences of migrants and are easy to explain to a non-specialist audience. Although they are a fundamental paradigm shift away from push-pull models and dominant narratives that portray ('South-North') migration as an act of desperation, they are strongly intuitive and easy to explain. They also make it possible to understand how macro-level processes of

change affect migration decisions and experiences on the micro- and meso-level. For instance, it is not difficult to explain to a non-specialist audience that 'development' tends to increase migration as it simultaneously increases people's aspirations and capabilities to move.

There is much more to say. These are just some key ingredients of what a new holistic paradigm on migration could look like. The above elements were primarily drawn from the 'Oxford School' of migration research developed at the International Migration Institute (IMI) since 2006. I certainly do not want to suggest that this is the only right one. There are many other valuable approaches that other researchers have taken, and that can be incorporated in such a perspective – such as, for instance, the extensive research done on integration, racism, diversity, migration policies as well as a recent surge in critical studies into refugee migration, smuggling, trafficking and the contested links between climate change, environmental change and migration.

Migration studies is an incredibly rich field of scientific inquiry in terms of approaches, methods and disciplines, and that diversity is something to celebrate and preserve. However, at the most fundamental level, whatever approach we choose, the fundamental requirement of a holistic migration paradigm is to conceptualize migration as a normal process that is inextricably embedded in larger processes of economic, cultural, technological, political and demographic transformations of which it is a constituent part.

Understanding the fundamental *normalcy* of migration will lead us to a totally new way of understanding human mobility – a new paradigm on the very nature and causes of migration that belies most things that we are usually told on the subject. The understanding of migration as a normal, partly autonomous social process, in which migrants organize their own journeys and exert their agency, also helps to put in perspective what policies can – and cannot – do, and to explain why policies tend to have unintended effects that frequently lead to their failure.

Crucially, evidence shows that that the ability of migration policies to shape migration is constrained by macro-structural migration determinants. This implies that 'non-migration policies' in the areas of labour markets, education, health care, welfare, and social protection pursued by origin and destination states have strong indirect effects on migration. From a holistic perspective, the failure of migration policies is explained by an inability or unwillingness to understand the complex and often counterintuitive ways in which structural social, economic, and political transformations affect migration in indirect, but powerful ways, which lie largely beyond the reach of migration policies (de Haas et al. 2019).

9. The need to tell better stories

This brings me to a last point, which is the need for more researchers to communicate their insights *directly* to a broader public, instead of mainly to fellow researchers, to interlocuters such as 'policy makers' or through intermediaries such as journalists. While such conversations can certainly be very

useful and should continue, they will not be able to change the dominant migration narratives – because, as we have seen, evidence that fundamentally challenges dominant narratives is often ignored.

Migration researchers should do so, not by mainly depending on intermediaries to 'relay' our stories, but by writing articles, books, op-eds and other texts for general, non-specialist audiences ourselves. This also requires us to think about 'audience' and 'communication' in a much broader and creative way. This could include getting involved in valuable activities such as rewriting schoolbooks, contributions to documentaries, animations, and other forms of art.

Despite the rapid increase in knowledge about migration from across the social science disciplines, the academic field of 'migration studies' has been strikingly unsuccessful in communicating insights to a broad readership beyond rather narrow circles of policy makers and other specialists. A few problems explain this unfortunate state of affairs. The first problem is the scattering of knowledge across academic disciplines. The second problem is that most knowledge has remained inaccessible to most-people because academic books are very expensive and because most articles in academic journals are locked up behind the prohibitive paywalls of academic journals.

The third problem is that migration researchers – like social sciences in general – have generally done a rather bad job in communicating their knowledge outside of the ivory tower. This partly reflects the incentive structure of contemporary academic careers, which rewards specialist publications in peer-reviewed journals but often undervalues, or even discourages, writing for non-academic audiences. However, to overcome the current climate of polarization and the amount of fact-free immigration fearmongering and migrant scapegoating, it is more urgent than ever to insert scientific insights into debates on immigration and related issues such as diversity, integration and racism.

As researchers, we can only do so if we start telling better migration stories – one about migration that challenges dominant narratives of 'migration as a problem' or 'migration as a solution'. To change migration narratives, the way forward is not to mainly share facts with insider circles of powerful people and institutions, but to share essential research insights by telling alternative stories about migration to the general public. The goal should not be to prescribe a particular opinion, but to equip the largest possible audiences with the deep knowledge that will enable them to critically scrutinize claims made by politicians, pundits, and experts, and see through the various forms of misinformation and propaganda that abound on this subject.

By necessity, such knowledge should be based in a holistic view that sees migration as a 'normal process' – one that benefits some people more than others, that can have downsides for some, that can simply not be thought or wished away, and one that is part and parcel of how we are, and who we have always been as human beings, and societies. Once we do away with unfounded panic and fear, and overcome the simplistic pro/anti framing, we create space for an informed debate about the benefits and downsides of immigration and about how to design better and more effective immigration policies that work better for all members of our societies, while avoiding the unnecessary suffering of migrants.

We can, and we should, do so much better.

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