
Introduction: the production of irregular migration

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Even though globalization promised a world where people, technology and capital could circulate freely, the reality in terms of people's mobility has been quite the opposite and is more like a "gated globalism" (Cunningham 2001, p. 382). After the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, we now live in a world that actually has 10 times more walls. From six walls in 1989, there are now at least 63 physical walls along borders or on occupied territory across the world, and in many countries, political leaders are arguing for even more walls.¹ This "gated globalism" is stratified and selective, and underlined by class, race, ethnicity and gender logics. It operates by "selectively allowing certain categories of people, goods and capital to flow across borders, while impeding the movement of others by use of walls, fences, military technologies, biometric tracking and boots on the ground" (Andrews-Speed et. al. 2014, p. 133).

While this *Handbook* explores the topic of irregular migration, broadly defined as the movement of people that takes place outside the laws, regulations, or international agreement governing the entry into or exit from the country of origin, transit or destination,² we critically examine the terminology and processes associated with the construction of irregularity as mechanisms to reinforce and perpetuate the exclusion and criminalization of populations for whom legal migration paths do not exist (Ambrozini 2013). By taking into account that irregular migration is inherently linked to geopolitics, geo-historical relations, migration politics, and economic considerations in the light of globalization and capitalism (e.g., Cross 2013, Jansen et al. 2015, Jordan and Düvell 2002, Mainwaring 2019) we aim to provide a critical perspective on irregular migration. In so doing, we do not intend to convey the illusion of a homogenized discourse around and on irregular migration. Instead, we seek to approach irregular migration from a plurality of perspectives and positionalities.

Hence, the *Handbook* takes an interdisciplinary approach that allows us to capture the complexity and diversity of the phenomenon as well as examining how irregularity has been governed, experienced and contested in various global/local settings over time. This means we delve into the analysis of the "moral economy" of migrant irregularity (Chauvin and Garcés-Mascreñas 2012) and the tensions between formal exclusion, inclusion and semi-inclusion of migrants (Menjívar 2006). In other words, we acknowledge what counts as irregular migration and who is considered an irregular migrant varies over time and space and is embedded in specific conditions, histories and structures of power (Ngai 2014).

Our departing point for this *Handbook* is a critical consideration of the processes and dynamics that generate and reproduce irregularity. This *Handbook* is not only a purely academic but also a political effort, as it seeks to generate a more generalized and profound questioning about the implications of governing migration through irregularity. This positioning accounts not only for our trajectory and for social capital, in general for our positionality, but also for our own blind spots, which can be not only conceptual and theoretical, but also, to some extent, experiential. We acknowledge and deeply thank the generosity of the migrants who have shared their life experiences with us. Their travels, trajectories, struggles and courage are

a continuous source of inspiration, and outrage, to continue questioning and pressing for better and more dignified ways to move.

1. THE PRODUCTION OF IRREGULAR MIGRATION

Irregularity is produced rather than an intrinsic characteristic of a particular individual on the move (De Genova 2002). But how exactly is irregular migration produced? There are three basic readings on (supra)state powers and the production of irregular migration. These readings are not mutually exclusive, but articulate different explanations of the phenomenon. First, there is a group of scholars who emphasize state and supra-state capabilities of handling unwanted migration (Brochmann and Hammar 1999). Powerful border regimes of the North – with their wide networks of building walls, externalized policies, deportation infrastructures (De Genova and Peutz 2010, Kalir and Wissink 2016), migration deals (Zoomers et al. 2018), visa regimes (Neumayer 2005, Van Houtum 2010), in/voluntary returns and development programmes (Bakewell 2008) – basically succeed in keeping control of irregular movements of unwanted people (see also Collyer in this *Handbook*).

Consequently, mobility rights have become one of the most important stratifying factors of globalization (Bauman 1998). If we start from such a position, irregular border crossings can then be seen as exceptional seep-throughs of a machine that basically fulfills its job – i.e., managing migration. Since the 1990s, the European Union (EU) has progressively attempted to form policies and measures that manage and efficiently govern mobility towards and within the EU. Stemming from the notion that human mobility can be controlled, the EU has extended the governance of irregular migration and asylum across third countries, via the policy approach of externalization of border controls. Zolberg (2003) uses the term “remote control” to denote immigration policies designed to deter immigration by regulating departure at, or near, the point of origin. Australia’s offshore asylum regime is the most well-known example of this policy of offshoring (Missbach 2015). But pre-boarding checks at “risky” airports are also part of this policy and a global chain of remote sites used by states of the Global North to confine migrants (Mountz 2020). EU migration policies also carry an ambiguous gender bias which seriously hampers migrant women’s opportunities in their destination countries (Van Liempt 2011, Marchetti and Salih 2017; see also Schrover in this *Handbook*).

Second, and in relation to the latter, there is a strand of literature that follows segmented labour market theories (Piore 1979) by articulating that irregular migration is an outcome of the functioning of transnational labour markets (e.g., Jordan and Düvell 2002). As national labour markets do not fulfill all needs for wealthy populations, there is a demand for cheap and exploitable labour (Portes 1978). Following this line, states and supra-state powers have an interest in maintaining irregularity. Governance techniques marginalize people without papers and, in so doing, they create *and* govern a cheap labour force (Van der Leun 2003). Saskia Sassen’s work on the global city (2001) also illustrates that cities have become highly dependent on irregular labour in a neo-liberal context where outsourcing public services to private businesses as well as cuts in benefits have resulted in the rise of a parallel economy that highly depends on irregular immigrant labour, like domestic workers (Anderson 2000, Bloch and Chimienti 2011), but also care and sex workers (see Garofalo Geymonat et al. in this *Handbook*). Within this context of employment, irregular migrants often fall within “the double” irregularity, being undeclared towards authorities both as workers and as migrants.

Some authors underline that these exploitable labour populations are deliberately kept mobile to enhance the “flexibility” of this labour force (e.g., Samaddar 2020, Tazzioli 2020).

Finally, there are scholars that depart from the position that states and supra-states are desperately out of control. They are simply lagging behind when it comes down to the dynamics of migration; they are always too late to react effectively to re-routings and collective tactics. The “migration as an industry” line of reasoning (Andersson 2014, Cranston et al. 2018, Missbach and Sinanu 2011, Salt and Stein 1997, Van Liempt 2007) fits this thought. Social networks also play a crucial role as facilitators of irregular migration (Massey et al. 1993), which contributes to the autonomous character of migration. These networks are “the sets of interpersonal ties that connect migrants, former migrants and non-migrants in origin and destination areas through ties of kinship, friendship and shared community origin” (Massey et al. 2005, p. 42). Information, resources and support that run through these networks may reduce the costs and risks of migration. Through these feedback mechanisms, migration becomes “a path-dependent process” because inter-personal relations across space facilitate subsequent migration (de Haas 2010, p. 1589; see also Staring and Kox in this *Handbook*). Whereas some scholars stress how migrants’ social networks and migration industries interconnect (Belloni 2016), others indicate that social networks also have their limitations and boundaries in migration processes (Collyer 2005; see also Staring and Kox in this volume).

The idea that states are out of control, and migration brokers, smugglers and migrant networks have *created* migration possibilities, also for those immigrants classified as “aliens” rather than “guests” by states (Sassen 1999), adds to this and feeds into the public fear around the failures of states’ migration management. What follows are more repressive actions by states and supra-states towards irregular migration, and above all, inactions in terms of intervening in situations where people are at risk (e.g., Mainwaring 2019; see also Heller et al. in this *Handbook*). Media attention, humanitarian concern and political pressure to act often result in even more restrictive border controls. In the end, there is a self-increasing cycle of modes of control and irregularity as restrictive policies generate irregularity (De Genova 2004). Ruben Andersson relates this cycle to the notion of absurdity, as he writes in his widely cited book *Illegality, Inc.*: “The illegality industry is like a sledgehammer that fails even in its task of cracking a nut. Attempts to combat illegality generate more illegality. Not only do clandestine migrants keep coming ... but also their routes and methods take increasingly surreal forms” (2014, p. 273). The changing routes and methods are related to the argument of the Autonomy of Migration literature in which migration is often considered a collective social force that creates social-spatial itineraries (Casas-Cortes et al. 2015) and alternative infrastructures (Wajsberg and Schapendonk 2021) that transgress the controlling power of migration apparatuses. Following this line of thought, it is argued that despite the hard border walls, the deathly necropolitics (Mbembe 2003), humanitarian dramas and the billions spent on securitization, irregular migratory movements continue to reflect an unruly “stubbornness” (Stierl 2017).

Whichever of the three narratives is followed, we argue that questions of irregular migration often do not translate in straightforward structure-agency stories. In other words, subjectification of the migrant goes hand in hand with power resistance (Squire 2015), and from spaces of structural marginalization new practices, solidarity acts and alternative infrastructures emerge (García Augustin and Jørgenson 2021).

2. QUESTIONING THE POLITICAL PRODUCTION OF IRREGULARITY

There exists academic consensus that irregular migration is highly politicized. Due to the political overtone, irregular migration attracts disproportionate media attention. This media coverage tends to represent irregular migration as an unambiguous and uncontested concept and a clear and fixed legal category. It appears logically straightforward that we should be able to tell whether a person is irregular or not. In reality, it is much more complex, and historically the lines of irregularity are highly dynamic as the priorities of migration regimes are likely to shift over time (from outward to inward migration, from asylum to labour migration) (e.g., Van Eijl 2012). Some categories of irregular migrants are hyper-visible in media or policy debates (e.g., young males arriving by boat), whereas other types of irregular migration hardly get any attention (e.g., privileged visa overstayers). It is telling in this regard how underaged migrants are highly visible in discussions on irregular migration in the United States, while they are rather underrepresented in similar discussions in Europe (Derluyn and Broekaert 2008, Lems et al. 2020).

In the 21st century, irregularity is inherently related to the lack of legal migration channels, and, in particular, the deterioration of asylum (Mountz 2020). One clear-cut example comes from the moment that Syria turned into a war zone. Before that moment, there were several legal options for Syrians to leave the country. But as soon as the war broke out, Western embassies closed their doors, and neighbouring countries like Jordan and Turkey closed their borders.³ This not only results in stranded populations, but it also produces public suspicion concerning refugees and criminalizes their movements from the very start.

The complexity and selected representation around who counts as an irregular migrant is also reflected in statistics on irregular migration – which have huge political and symbolic significance. Migrants represent roughly 3.5 per cent of the world’s population – and those in irregular situations are again a fraction of this migrant population. For the United States, it is reported that roughly 11 million migrants live in irregularity (Rosenblum and Ruiz Soto 2015). Although rough and volatile, estimates on the size of irregular migration in the EU point to a quite limited phenomenon involving between 1.9 and 3.8 million people in 2008 (Kovacheva and Vogel 2009). This substantially lower share in the EU can be explained by the fact that many border crossers are, in the end, acknowledged refugees after their asylum procedures, which indicates the importance of distinguishing irregular entries from irregular stays (Triandafyllidou 2016 and Triandafyllidou in this *Handbook*). In 2013, for instance, 63 per cent of all migrants who entered Europe by means of a risky boat journey fled from violence and/or political oppression as they came from Syria, Eritrea, Afghanistan and Somalia (Jansen et al. 2015, p. xiii). Thus, while the entries of these migrants are counted in statistics on “irregular migration”, they do not add to the population size that faces irregularity in Europe.

There have been multiple attempts to “count” irregular populations on national, supra-national or global levels, and this has proven to be an extremely difficult academic endeavour. This difficulty is not only methodological (as irregularity is characterized by a lack of registration) (Koser 2010), but also because definitions, capacities of local/national bureaucracies and political motivations to count irregular migration vary considerably. More importantly, counting irregular movements is, in the end, a political act – as it is ultimately a matter of representation. Research practices of counting are, in that sense, not necessarily different from police investigations and governmental techniques of counting (e.g., Düvell et al. 2010). In this regard,

there is a clear parallel with the use of migration maps that portray undocumented migration as invasion-like threats (Van Houtum and Bueno Lacy 2020). Based on these observations, and the fact that migration studies as an academic field is deeply entangled with nation-state agendas (Dahinden 2016), we indeed need to unlearn some of our default research questions (Aparna 2020) and research methods (Alonso Bejarano et al. 2019).

Furthermore, a closer look at the complexities of irregular entries and irregular stays shows that there is no black-and-white distinction between what is regular and what is irregular (see Triandafyllidou in this volume). There are many different “degrees” of irregularity and many people are caught in grey zones with unclear statuses that can change from day to day (Kubal 2013). Moreover, if one follows people’s trajectories across borders (Schapendonk et al. 2020), one is sensitive to the ways people jump over legal categories in these processes (Schuster 2005). For these reasons, we decide not to delve any deeper into the general numbers provided above. We do not re-amplify certain numbers on stocks or flows, as this would be part of the politics of counting (Tazzioli 2015) and crises talks (DeBono 2016) that frame and reproduce “crises” as exceptionalized and highly politicized moments (Crawley et al. 2018, Mainwaring 2019, Samaddar 2016). We instead prefer to raise questions, like what does it *mean* when it is reported that the US houses 11 million irregular migrants (Rosenblum and Ruiz Soto 2015)? Can we really know the size of undocumented populations in worlding cities like Lagos, Amsterdam, Buenos Aires, Cairo and Jakarta (see also Van Eijl 2012)? And if so, for whose agenda do we count? Can we simply add the 3700 UK tourists who overstayed their visa in Australia between 2017–2018 to the people who fled crises and arrived by boat on Australian shores the same year? Why, or why not? What is actually counted in reports written by border agencies on irregular border crossings? To focus on the latter, Nando Sigona powerfully showed that during Europe’s long summer of migration, migrants were counted twice as they entered the EU zone (in Greece, for example) then left the EU zone (through Albania or Serbia) to re-enter the EU again (via Hungary or Croatia) (Sigona 2015). It follows that the same person appears multiple times in Frontex (The European Border and Coast Guard Agency) statistics on irregular migration. This is a remarkable fact as some studies show how people try up to 14 times to cross European borders (Hannoum 2019); other studies indicate that people tend to re-migrate after they are deported (Kleist 2018). Double counting resulted in an overestimating of the amount of irregular border crossings, which politically fed into the overall representation of a “refugee crisis” along European borders.

Rather than seducing the readers with the idea that there exist clear-cut and neutral numbers and statistics on irregular migration, we follow a Foucauldian argument by regarding statistics on irregular migration as governmental instruments that are central to the functioning of migration apparatuses (Feldman 2012). The counting of irregular migration should then be put in line with the general observation that irregular migration is constructed, depicted and addressed by discourses, policies and politics of spectacle (De Genova 2015) and securitization (Bigo 2002). De Genova’s “border spectacle” definition underscores the entanglements between border control infrastructure and the construction of irregularity (De Genova 2015; see also Andersson 2014, Campos-Delgado 2018, Orsini 2019). While the border spectacle sets a scene of exclusion of “the unwanted”, it simultaneously demonstrates (and hence legitimises) the naturalness of the border (De Genova 2015, p. 108). At the same time, we acknowledge that the border spectacle also tends to reproduce the image that irregular migration is inherently linked to hard and violent borders – the camps, walls and fences of our age (Jones 2016). This notion creates specific blind spots as well, such as that irregularity often

emerges after a border crossing that is completely in line with the law. Moreover, the spectacle also tends to ignore the ways irregular pathways provoke specific enduring challenges and emotions for migrants (Campos-Delgado 2021). In other words, people living in irregularity can often not relate to the notion of the spectacle, as their lives unfold in invisible ways, possibly involving feelings of timelessness, boredom and waiting. The latter also stresses the chrono-political dimension of migration governance. Borders, in other words, are not only spatial but also temporal entities (e.g., Fontanari 2017, Stock 2019).

3. CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ON IRREGULAR MIGRATION: OUTLINE OF THE BOOK

So if it is not the volume of irregular migration this book is addressing, what then does it intend to contribute to discussions on irregular migration? We start from three main points of departure. First, we acknowledge that research on irregular migration is dominated by what we call a Northern optic. Most studies, insights and theories on irregular or undocumented migration come from the US or Europe. Hannoum (2019), for example, illustrates how the frameworks to discuss European and African migration are completely separated (see also Golovko and Molenaar in this *Handbook*). Postcolonial scholars point to the violence that this Northern gaze produces. This violence includes the prepossessed and historical insensitive definition of “the Age of Migration” (Samaddar 2020) – a book title that is a widely embraced starting point in discussions around irregular migration too (De Haas et al. 2020). One of the problems of the definition of the Age of Migration is that it starts from the Northern managerial point of departure of the globalized labour market (as a tipping point in the production of migration after the Second World War). This departure point, as Samaddar (2020, p. 13) writes, “disguises, displaces and reconfigures other realities of migration”.

As editors of this book, we tried to re-balance this Northern optic in two ways. First, we intended to include other readings and other perspectives on issues related to irregularity, but we succeeded only partly in doing so as our own networks are biased and some foreseen contributors kindly declined the invitation to contribute to this *Handbook*. Our second way of re-balancing the Northern gaze is starting from the interrelated notions that (a) the production of irregular migration is tied to modern conceptualization of citizenship and its racialized exclusionary principles (Bhambra 2015), and (b) irregular migration is shaped by persistent colonial relations.

With regard to the former issue, the main question is how irregularity is linked to the fundamental question of how difference is made (and unmade) (Bhambra 2017). It is safe to state that race and ethnicity – as complex socio-cultural constructs, not objective biological differentiators – remain all too often blind spots in work on irregular migration, although this is slowly changing (De Genova 2005, Hannoum, 2019; see also M’charek in this *Handbook*). By relying on Hannah Arendt’s work, Kalir, for example, in this *Handbook* argues that the structural violence against – and dehumanization of – undocumented migrants in Western societies is embedded in the ideology of “subject race”. He underlines that a sense of moral superiority does not only lead to draconic practices of deportation, but also contributes to the incorporation of humanitarian organizations and non-governmental organizations in deportation practices. On the more embodied level, Khosravi’s (2010, 2018) work highlights how through racialized fault lines migrant Others *are themselves* the border.

With regard to the second argument of persistent colonial relations, we point to extractive colonial acts in the economic and political sense. For instance, M'charek (2020) illustrates how contemporary irregular migration of Tunisian youngsters is inherently related to continued extraction of salt by French companies on Tunisian soil. To stress the coloniality of irregular migration, we not only pay attention to migrant practices, but also articulate how irregularity is constructed and discursively framed, be it by state and supra-state actors, street-level bureaucrats, public discourse or migration industry actors.

Here we also acknowledge a gendered representation of irregular migration (see also Gray and Franck 2019, Stock 2012). Economic stratification of irregular workers in the domestic, care and sex work industry, for example, is highly racialized and gendered, often according to specific body characteristics and cultural stereotypes. In this context, recruitment agencies, brokers and employers can play an important role in reproducing sexist and racist ideas around irregular work and migration. However, while Othering practices and language of exclusion (e.g., Schrover and Schinkel 2013) are key to the problematization of irregularity, it is not only discursive or social differentiation that produces difference. From the hardware of barbed wire in camped spaces to the complexity of digital networks, the production of irregularity – and the politics of mobility in general – has also a clear material dimension, which is reflected in the infrastructural turn in migration studies (e.g., Xiang and Lindquist 2014). In this respect, Walters, Heller and Pezzani (2022, p. 15) propose the notion of “viapolitics” to unpack the role of vehicles in questions of migration. Vehicles of migration become objects of contention *and* transformation – as they are both the means that make people’s movements possible and the means for governing the same movements. Unpacking rather diverse mechanisms that produce difference in questions of irregularity is a central aim of this book.

A second starting point of the book is that we emphasize dynamics over statics and boundedness. Irregular migration trajectories oftentimes lack any coherence or linearity (Kleist 2020, Vammen 2019), especially when analyzed in relation to migration regimes (Schapendonk et al. 2020). Next to border control, migration regimes rely on a wide variety of tools and techniques, including development aid (Collyer 2020), visa policies and affective bordering practices in the presumed countries of origin (Vammen 2021), as well as various return migration practices (DeBono 2016, Kalir and Wissink 2016, Lietaert 2021). Partly because of this interplay between migrant itineraries on the one hand, and the multiplicity of bordering and ordering practices (Van Houtum and Van Naerssen 2002) on the other, we do not start from the idea that irregularity is a fixed and structural position. We acknowledge that experiences and migrants’ spaces to maneuver are incomparable in different settings and that people move out, escape from or transgress border regimes (Schapendonk 2020). Undocumented migrants are often analyzed in line with Agamben’s (2005) notion of bare lives, and there might be good reasons for that. At the same time, there are settings where undocumented migrants become relatively powerful groups in a political landscape, as, for instance, Walter Nicholls’ work illustrates (Nicholls 2014, Nicholls and Sorrell-Medina in this volume). Furthermore, irregularity is not a fixed legal category since people may move in and out of irregularity (Schuster 2005). Equally so, they may find tactics – often through mobile solidarities (Squire 2011) – to undo and contest the power of discursive labels. Undocumented migrants indeed continue to subvert borders (Stierl 2018).

In line with the latter, it is important to move away from state-defined categories and definitions of legal/illegal when, for example, human smuggling is conceptualized as a response to humanitarian needs (Morrison and Crosland 2000; Pastore et al. 2006; Sanchez 2014; Van

Liempt 2007, 2021), an act of survival and/or an act of solidarity (Khosravi 2010, Missbach 2015). In this case the distinction between licit and illicit has proven to be more helpful than a strict legal separation of legal vs illegal acts (e.g., Molenaar and Kamouni-Janssen 2017). The terms “licit” and “illicit” refer to social perceptions of activities that are defined as criminal by the state (Van Schendel and Itty 2005). In sum, starting from the position that prioritizes dynamics over statics, this book stresses how individual aspirations change, journeys and displacements continue, migration facilitations transform, borders move, social networks and migration facilitators merge (Belloni 2016) and geopolitical grounds shift. For the reason (and promise) that any political situation is in the end unstable, we also include the promises and effects of solidarity acts and contestation of violent borders.

A final starting point is that we intend to discuss irregular migration from multiple disciplinary angles and positions. This book includes contributions by political scientists, legal scholars, anthropologists, geographers, artists, historians and sociologists. We deliberately included the perspectives coming from renowned voices in the field of migration studies as well as the provocative ideas and writings of early career scholars. This all results in a collage of diverse arguments, lived geographies, border realities, macro–micro perspectives and writing styles that we further introduce below.

4. BOOK STRUCTURE

The volume is organized in six parts, consists of 30 chapters and ends with an epilogue where Prof. Alison Mountz reflects on the *Handbook* as a whole.

The first part deals with approaches and perspectives on irregular migration. It touches upon how to define and measure irregular migration and the power of language in discourses around irregular migration. Here we also address ethical issues and dilemmas as well as methodological obstacles and solutions that researchers encounter when working in this field. The consequences that research into irregular migration can have for the people involved is something that cannot be underestimated, and has to be considered in the evaluation of ethical and methodological reflections and implications.

The second part is about aspirations and facilitation of irregular migration in different countries of origin. Cultures around migration will be addressed, as well as the impact of hurdles, constraints and risks in migration decision making.

In the third part we zoom in on everyday life and (im)mobility and address issues around agency and autonomy/control, and in the fourth part irregular transit migration and issues around informal and irregular labour and exploitability. The fifth part, *Geopolitics and Micropolitics of Control*, delves into states’ arrangements to manage and govern migration. In the last part we address solidarity, advocacy and contestation.

NOTES

1. <https://www.tni.org/en/walledworld>.
2. This definition is a widely accepted starting point; see: <https://www.iom.int/key-migration-terms>.
3. <https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/special-report/2016/03/10/no-way-out-how-syrians-are-struggling-find-exit>.

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