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# Why Has Migration Research So Little Impact? Examining Knowledge Practices in Migration Policy Making and Migration Studies

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## Abstract

Scientific and expert knowledge on migration is often disregarded in policy making and plays only a minor role in public debates - despite the massive growth and institutionalization of migration research in recent years. This article interrogates the limited impact of migration research(ers) by examining knowledge practices in both policy making and academia. We first look “outwards” at migration policy making. Revisiting and integrating the hitherto separate scholarship on knowledge use and knowledge production, we identify the main mechanisms that characterize knowledge practices of policy actors, such as individual and institutional self-preservation, issue politicization, or unequal power dynamics. We then mobilize these insights to look “inwards” at our own knowledge practices in migration studies, showing that similar mechanisms shape how migration scholars produce and use knowledge. In particular, we identify a fragmentation of migration studies into ever-more fine-grained sub-fields, each with their own knowledge practices and impact strategies - and with little dialogue across them. In fact, rather than

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acknowledging their complementarity, these sub-fields tend to delegitimize each other's knowledge and efforts to achieve socio-political change. We argue that such "academic tribalism" creates a self-sabotaging dynamic that undermines the field's wider credibility and impact. Ultimately, we hope that this paper empowers migration researchers to act upon this diagnosis and inspires a collective discussion on how to foster more mutually-reinforcing knowledge practices that strengthen the field's role in political debates and public life.

### **Keywords**

impact, knowledge production, knowledge use

## **Introduction: More Research, Less Impact?**

*Oh what a frustrating topic!* This was the most frequent reaction when telling colleagues that we were writing an article about the societal and policy impact of migration research(ers). While many highlighted that shaping "reality out there" was an intrinsic driver and essential part of their work, they also reported "a sense of deep individual and collective frustration" (Kalir and Cantat 2020, 3) about the fact that their knowledge seemed to have little impact on public debates around migration or the design of migration policy (see: Baldwin-Edwards, Blitz, and Crawley 2018; Carmel and Kan 2018; Boswell 2008; Ruhs, Tamas, and Palme 2019; Amelung, Scheel, and van Reekum 2024; de Haas 2024).

This limited impact is puzzling for two reasons: First, migration research has historically emerged at least in part to respond to state needs of "managing" human mobility and often continues to be intrinsically entangled with state interests and priorities (Mayblin and Turner 2020; Favell 2022). One would thus expect migration research(ers) to be particularly impactful—and some studies have indeed shown that academics and other experts were central in past migration policy making (Scholten 2009; Guiraudon 2003). Second, this limited impact is puzzling because migration studies has institutionalized as a scholarly field over the past decades, as is evidenced in growing research funding, new migration journals and research institutes (Pisarevskaya et al. 2019; Piccoli, Ruedin, and Geddes 2023). Consequently, one might think that migration scholars should have become more proficient at making their research count in political decision-making or heard by citizens.

Indeed, an impressive amount of migration knowledge has been produced in recent years across a range of disciplines—from law, history, demography, and economics to political science, sociology, geography, and anthropology—and by a variety of actors within and outside of academia. Some scholars have even warned of a "migration knowledge hype" (Braun et al. 2018) accompanied by problematic dynamics of "intimacy" between migration scholars and policymakers (Stierl 2022) and "research fatigue" among "over-researched" migrant groups (Omata 2021; Pascucci 2017). Yet, the improved understanding of migrant decision-making,

migrants' impact on host and home countries, or migration policy effects seems not to have reduced the "knowledge–policy gap" (Ruhs, Tamas, and Palme 2019; Cornelius et al. 2004). This is even more striking given that "evidence-based policy making" has become a buzzword also in migration policy circles (Cairney 2016; Christensen 2021; Hoppe 2005; Capano and Malandrino 2022).

As a result, policymakers often continue to enact and pursue migration policies known not to work. The list of such policies is long: it includes the criminalization of migrant smuggling, when we know that the absence of regular pathways creates the very conditions for smuggling to thrive (Andersson 2016; Massey, Durand, and Pren 2016; Alpes 2016); the restriction of migrants' cash-based social welfare to reduce "pull factors," when there is little evidence that social welfare drives settlement decisions (Ferwerda, Marbach, and Hangartner 2024; Zavodny 1999); the rolling-out of development programs to "tackle the root causes of migration" despite numerous studies showing that development in low-income countries tends to increase rather than decrease emigration (Clemens and Postel 2018; de Haas 2007; Fuchs et al. 2023); or the introduction of travel visa requirements to reduce migration, despite vast evidence that such restrictions often reduce circular movements and tend to push people into settlement instead of return (Czaika and de Haas 2017; Massey and Pren 2012). These examples raise the question: Why does migration research have so little impact?

Of course, as many colleagues have noted, migration is a politically salient issue with high potential for societal polarization. Combined with the overall rise of post-truth politics and populism that dismiss facts, science and expertise, this has created an environment in which migration knowledge is often cherry-picked, disregarded or actively distorted (see: Berling and Bueger 2017; Newman and Clarke 2018; de Haas 2023, 2024; Baldwin-Edwards, Blitz, and Crawley 2018; Kalir and Cantat 2020).<sup>1</sup> In this article, however, we would like to look beyond these political obstacles for research impact that lie largely outside of our individual control as migration researchers. We seek to show that the lacking or even dwindling impact of migration research in the face of the fields' rapid expansion might not be all that puzzling if we put into dialogue the dynamics characterizing knowledge practices in policy making *and* academia. Reorienting our attention from broader political and structural hurdles to our own knowledge practices offers, we argue, a first empowering step to bring the agency of migration researchers back into the impact debate.

Before we proceed, a note on what we mean by migration research and impact. When speaking about migration research, we consider both scientific knowledge produced by academics within universities and expert knowledge produced by

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<sup>1</sup>The fact that migration policy targets foreigners who are by definition often excluded from the demos might in fact exacerbate dynamics of post-truth politics compared to other social science fields such as research on education or inequality, where policies primarily target citizens (and are thus accountable to voters).

practitioners in think-tanks, civil society, or in-house research units of ministries and international organizations. Such expert knowledge has proliferated in the recent past, to the extent that Amelung, Scheel, and van Reekum (2024, 2163) even identify a “risk of marginalization” of scientific knowledge on migration. As we show, these dynamics between scientific and expert knowledge producers — and the overarching question of whose knowledge is seen as legitimate — are central to our discussion of research impact.

When speaking about impact, we refer to the ambition of those producing migration research within or outside of academia to shape “reality out there.” Evidently, this ambition and related ideas of what role knowledge should play in politics and society vastly differ not only between academics and practitioners, but also among academics. Migration scholars’ ideas of what impact looks like diverge not only in terms of the ultimate goals pursued but also in the forms of engagement used and the audiences targeted (Alpes 2024; Lacroix, Potot, and Schmoll 2021; Favell 2022). While some take on a more reformist stance towards politics that privileges engaging decision-makers and societal stakeholders to foster evidence-based policy, others take on a more revolutionary stance that seeks to abolish state governance of migration as a whole and sometimes even rejects the very term impact, instead preferring to speak of resistance.

In this article, we adopt a broad conception of impact that encompasses both direct policy impact through advising policymakers or influencing law-making and implementation, as well as broader societal impact, which can be about empowering civil society actors, amplifying marginalized voices of resistance or educating the broader citizenry to shift narratives around migration. These are clearly distinct but not necessarily conflicting impact strategies—even if they are often framed as such—, as shifting public narratives can in the long term affect political priorities and, thus, policy making. Of course, not all scholarship pursues the ambition to have societal or policy impact. Scientific impact in itself is a vital, essential goal in academia and also “policy-irrelevant research” can generate powerful practical insights (Bakewell 2008). However, such scholarship lies beyond the scope of this article. Here, we are concerned with how migration knowledge producers who seek to shape social reality conceive impact and the road to achieve it.

With this article, we seek to make two central contributions: First, we want to bring into dialogue the two main bodies of literature that have examined the role of knowledge in (migration) politics, namely the literature on *knowledge use* and *knowledge production*. While they have remained largely separate from each other, in our view questions of who is involved in knowledge creation, what is considered legitimate knowledge and how knowledge is used in politics are inherently entangled and thus need to be analyzed together. Second, we combine a *look outwards* at policy actors’ knowledge use and production with a *look inwards* at how migration researcher produce and use knowledge. Contrasting and comparing knowledge practices in policy making and academia is, we argue, necessary to fully grasp the opportunities and constraints for socio-political impact.

The paper is structured as follows: In the next section, we start by reflecting on our own role as migration researchers and why we felt the need to write this paper now, as part of the 60th Anniversary Special Issue of the *International Migration Review*. We also clarify our analytical and methodological approach.

In the section "Looking Outwards", we delve into the knowledge practices of migration policy actors. While a large literature examines questions of research impact and knowledge use in policy making, these are rarely connected to reflections on the nature of knowledge production. Reviewing and integrating the social science scholarship on knowledge use and knowledge production, we identify the main mechanisms that shape knowledge practices of policy actors such as state institutions, IOs or EU agencies. We discuss the different functions that migration research has in migration policy making, as well as how (scientific and expert) knowledge both serves to maintain power and is inherently shaped by it.

In the section "Looking Inwards", we mobilize these mechanisms to make sense of the knowledge practices of migration scholars. We show that also in migration studies, institutional or personal logics of self-preservation and unequal power dynamics can account in large parts for what and by whom scholarly knowledge is created, considered as legitimate and reproduced. In particular, we identify dynamics of fragmentation and "academic tribalism" (Becher and Trowler 2001) between sub-fields of migration studies and show that they are to some extent self-sabotaging the field's broader goal of achieving societal and policy change. Although it is neither necessary nor desirable that migration studies as a field speaks with one coherent voice or shares the same understanding of impact, we argue that the tendency to de-legitimize migration scholarship grounded in different epistemological traditions ultimately undermines the collective credibility and legitimacy of migration research(ers) in society and politics.

In the conclusion, we reflect on how we can act on this diagnosis of the field by outlining three scenarios for migration studies' further institutionalization and potential for collective impact: dissolution, sclerosis, and reinvigoration. Ultimately, our aim with this article is to initiate a constructive conversation amongst migration researchers of different "tribes" on how to leverage the plurality and complementarity of different approaches towards social change and achieve more collective impact.

## **The Why and How of This Article: Positionality and Methodology**

In their call for papers,<sup>2</sup> the editors of *International Migration Review* invited articles "that self-reflect on the state of migration research and our contributions, both realized and aspirational, as researchers, scholars, and practitioners." It specifically asked

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<sup>2</sup><https://cmsny.org/call-for-papers-special-issue-honoring-imr-60th-anniversary/>, last accessed 6 May 2024.

that papers “not only review, critique, and synthesize the existing research, but also reflect on if, how, and to what extent that research has engaged with audiences and communities across disciplines and among scholarly and geographic space.” As scholars working on both knowledge use and knowledge production in migration policy, this call inspired us not only to revisit scholarly insights on research impact but also to reflect on our own knowledge practices.

Rather than speaking from a distance, as analysts of migration studies and policy, with this article we seek to speak from within: as scholars experiencing the developments in migration research over the past decade, as early career researchers trying to establish ourselves professionally while navigating implicit and explicit demands of institutions, funders, colleagues, and research participants, and as people seeking to ethically and purposefully do our work. While the struggles we face are shared by many of our colleagues, we speak from the privileged position of having contracts, one of us permanently, at research institutions in Europe and the funding, networks, and status that come with it.

Our respective paths in academia coincided with the rapid expansion and institutionalization of migration studies. We both started working on (the politics of) migration in the early 2010s, as Master students, research assistants, and then PhD researchers. We have witnessed first-hand the “gold rush” dynamics that have captured the field in Europe and beyond since the so-called “migration crisis” in 2015 (Stierl 2022; Braun et al. 2018; Cabot 2019), reinvigorated by every new politicized migratory movement, such as displacement from Ukraine since 2022. As many others, we have professionally benefited from the growth of migration studies, characterized by the creation of new migration journals, research centers, and networks (Levy, Pisarevskaya, and Scholten 2020; Pisarevskaya et al. 2019; Piccoli, Ruedin, and Geddes 2023). We were employed through projects or by academic institutions relying on migration-specific funding. We have emphasized the societal relevance of migration to acquire funds, organize workshops, and develop research projects. And we have been invited to contribute to migration-specific conferences and special issues, or to speak as experts at policy events and in public debates.

In this article, we aim to work out a tension that is shared by many, especially early career migration scholars. On the one hand, we need to “tick the right boxes” to secure our professional future through publishing in high-impact journals, acquiring funds or being recognized by our academic peers. As Levitt (2023, 862) writes, “young scholars [...] have to play by the rules [...]. They have to publish in high-ranking journals, write about acceptable topics in ways that hit the established benchmarks” in order to persevere in the precarious and temporary academic job market. On the other hand, we expect ourselves to conduct ethical, innovative and impactful research that contributes to improving the world we live in. However, the neoliberal, competitive academic market tends to reward working with and citing recognized authorities, as well as publishing in selective (English-language) journals that often hide research insights

behind paywalls from those who were researched or could act on that research. Publishing in non-English language outlets or collaborating with less privileged academics and academic institutions—however intellectually or personally rewarding it might be—tends to be penalized by the academic market, as it requires investing time in translations and relationships that do not lead to immediate research output and therefore often remain invisible (Mott and Cockayne 2017; Levitt 2023; Burton and Bowman 2022; Hyland and Jiang 2021; Kalfa, Wilkinson, and Gollan 2018). In a way, it often seems impossible to “do it right” in migration research.<sup>3</sup> Of course, these dynamics characterize academia and social science research more broadly. However, we argue that the rapid growth of migration research coupled with the political salience and polarization around migration have exacerbated these tensions in recent years.

With this article, we seek to initiate a collective reflection about how this tension might stand in our way when it comes to impact. While we cannot overhaul the structural constraints that shape academia or the role of knowledge in politics from one day to the next, we can work towards a more honest assessment of how our knowledge practices might impede our ambitions for impact. From this point, we can focus on cultivating knowledge practices that recognize the professional and political constraints we have to navigate but reinforce each other’s voices instead of undermining them. This, we argue, would also do justice to the topics we research and the people we work with.

This paper, then, is not a classic review paper that provides an exhaustive synthesis of all work published on the role of knowledge in (migration) politics based on a systematic literature review or meta-analysis. Rather, it connects central insights from the hitherto separate scholarly fields on knowledge use and knowledge production and mobilizes them for a self-reflection on the knowledge practices dominating migration scholarship and how these shape our potential for impact. With this aim in mind, we took inspiration from the integrative literature review approach, whose purpose is “not to cover all articles ever published on the topic but rather to combine perspectives and insights from different fields or research traditions” (Snyder 2019, 336) in order to “build bridges across different communities and break down silos” (Cronin and George 2023, 185). We first thematically analyzed the knowledge use and knowledge production literature to tease out key mechanisms

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<sup>3</sup>In relation to this, see also Cairney and Oliver (2020) on the professional dilemmas faced by political science scholars when thinking about meaningful impact strategies, Bloemraad and Menjivar (2022) on the tension between migration scholars’ ethical responsibilities to research participants and the open science movements’ call for data transparency and accountability, as well as Böckmann et al. (2024) on the discomfort created by universities’ and funders’ expectations to constantly make ourselves and our research visible to demonstrate impact.

characterizing policy actors' knowledge practices.<sup>4</sup> On this basis, and combined with our own observations of the dynamics structuring (European)<sup>5</sup> migration studies since the early 2010s, we then reflected on our knowledge use and production as migration scholars. This dual analytical lens—on the one hand integrating knowledge use and knowledge production scholarship and on the other hand juxtaposing knowledge practices of policy actors and migration scholars—also informed how we structured the two substantive sections of our paper, to which we turn now.

## Looking Outwards

This section looks at policy actors' knowledge practices through the lens of two bodies of scholarship that provide very different explanations for the “knowledge–policy” gap due to their different epistemological foundations and research foci. The knowledge use literature, born out of policy studies, institutionalist political science and organizational sociology, largely understands knowledge as a given and explains the lacking impact of research through institutional dynamics of policy making, such as organizational self-preservation, inter-actor trust, and issue politicization. In contrast, the knowledge production literature, which emerged out of Science and Technology Studies (STS), critical theory, and interpretive policy analysis, emphasizes that knowledge is actively produced through the perspectives of policy actors and thus explains lacking research impact through the power dynamics that shape what knowledge is deemed legitimate in the first place. Integrating these two perspectives is, we argue, key to comprehensively understand the role knowledge plays in migration policy making.

## *How Migration Policy Actors Use Knowledge*

Historically, scholarship on knowledge use adopted a functionalist, positivist understanding of knowledge as neutral, objective source of information that could

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<sup>4</sup>Key search terms for the knowledge use literature were “evidence-based policy making,” “expertise,” “knowledge utilization,” “knowledge use,” “expert knowledge,” “epistemic communities,” “policy-research dialogues,” “science-policy interface,” “knowledge–policy gap”; key search terms for the knowledge production literature were “knowledge production,” “politics of knowledge,” “power/knowledge,” “hegemonic knowledge,” “decolonizing knowledge,” “ontological politics,” “knowledge practices,” “politics of citation,” “co-production of research.”

<sup>5</sup>Some of our observations, e.g. the important role of project funding in university research and the resulting knowledge production dynamics, might be more relevant to academia and migration research in Europe and its neighborhood compared to for instance the United States (DeWind 2020) or other parts of the globe.

pragmatically contribute to policy making (Hoppe 1999). The idea was that by studying the policy process in detail, knowledge *on* policy would help improve the role of knowledge *in* policy. However, this initial optimism regarding the role of knowledge waned over time (Weiss 1991). Experiences of knowledge misuse or neglect redirected the scholarly focus from a rationalist approach of “speaking truth to power” to how policymakers interpret and navigate knowledge claims, as well as to how research-policy relations influence knowledge (non-)use (Hoppe 1999; Shulock 1999; Capano and Malandrino 2022; Cairney and Oliver 2020).

Within this broader literature, migration scholars have examined when, why, and what kind of migration knowledge is used by policy actors. Concretely, this literature brings out three key dynamics: (a) that policy actors often use knowledge symbolically to legitimize their existence or pre-existing preferences; (b) that institutional dynamics shape how knowledge is used (or not) by policy actors, as knowledge can get easily lost in turf wars or complex organizational processes; and (c) that the level of salience and politicization of migration is crucial to understand knowledge (non-)use.

First of all, knowledge use scholarship has shown that knowledge fulfills various functions in policy making (Boswell 2009; Shulock 1999). Clearly, knowledge can be used instrumentally to enhance the effectiveness of policies or help achieve intended objectives. In this case, knowledge serves a problem-solving function by providing technical or substantive guidance for policy decisions (Sabatier 1978). For example, when the British Home Office developed its liberal labor migration reform in the early 2000s, it relied on research demonstrating how to leverage immigration for positive economic impact (Boswell 2015). However, although institutions like to uphold the “myth of instrumental use” (Boswell 2009, 249), knowledge often rather serves as ammunition in political or organizational power struggles (Radaelli 1995; Boswell 2009; Weiss 1977; Boswell et al. 2011).

Christina Boswell’s work (2008, 2009) has been particularly influential in showing how knowledge is used symbolically to enhance policymakers’ institutional power, justify existing preferences or support their organizational legitimacy. For instance, in Italy, a Scientific Committee was tasked in 2006 to draft a Charter of the Values of Citizenship and Integration to “give scientific substance to an already established normative goal” (Caponio 2015, 10). Also, institutions such as the German Federal Office for Migration and Refugees (BAMF) or the EU Commission have established in-house research units on migration in 2005 and 2008, respectively, to bolster their authority and legitimacy vis-à-vis political rivals and the public (Boswell 2015, 2008). While policy-driven research commissioned by state institutions has, in principle, a higher chance of being used instrumentally than theory-driven research conducted in universities, commissioned research also often ends up being used only symbolically or is entirely disregarded.

The second key insight of the knowledge use literature is that knowledge can easily crumble or get lost in power plays among state institutions, especially as

migration is an issue that lies at the intersection of different ministries and levels of governance (Natter 2023; Calavita 1992; Caponio and Jones-Correa 2018). For instance, Alagna (2023) showed that the EU Parliament ultimately acted against the evidence collected by its own internal research service on search and rescue operations at sea to avoid jeopardizing its negotiation power with the EU Commission and Council.

Given the complex institutional dynamics around migration, scholars are often unsure who their right policy interlocutory is in the first place and how to best communicate their knowledge (Cairney and Oliver 2020). Indeed, the form that research–policy relationships take — whether these are personal relations between policymakers and researchers, ad-hoc scientific advisory commissions or institutionalized in-house research facilities — matters. Also, the level of trust among actors importantly shapes whether, how and what kind of knowledge is taken on board (Scholten, Entzinger, and Penninx 2015; Ruhs, Tamas, and Palme 2019). For example, Caponio (2015) traced the history of policy-research relations around integration policy in Italy and showed how different dialogue formats led to different knowledge use outcomes, despite the “experts” being largely the same over time. And looking at the United States, Pettrachin and Hadj Abdou (2024) showed that policymakers’ assessment of what qualifies as evidence on irregular migration and asylum is decisively shaped by dynamics of trust and perceptions of political and organizational like-mindedness among actors.

A third key insight of this literature is that, as migration is a salient issue subject to polarized debates, politicization dynamics importantly shape how knowledge is used. However, the effect of politicization on research-policy interactions is context-dependent: While in Austria and Germany, politicization of integration issues led to the institutionalization of research-policy dialogues, in the Netherlands, Italy, and Great Britain it led to their de-institutionalization (Scholten, Entzinger, and Penninx 2015). Also, politicization can lead either to a greater disregard of knowledge given pressures to pursue ideological commitments, or to a greater use of knowledge to signal commitments, solve problems or legitimize certain policy measures (Boswell 2009). For instance, in the case of the EU Trust Fund for Africa, institutions were “more willing to learn when there are high reputational costs attached” (Boersma et al. 2022, 89), as was the case for highly salient and mediatized issues such as collaboration with illegitimate governments. In contrast, in the case of anti-smuggling policies, expert knowledge on the fatal consequences of criminalization has been actively dismissed precisely because it conflicts with political–electoral demands (Baldwin-Edwards, Blitz, and Crawley 2018; Alagna 2023). Similarly, the “root causes narrative” in migration and development policies prevails despite evidence of its ineffectiveness because it bolsters the EU’s legitimacy as a foreign policy actor and at least symbolically shows that “something is being done” about migration (Zaun and Nantermoz 2022). One of the most important insights from this growing literature, then, is to take politicization dynamics seriously to understand selective knowledge use.

Taken together, this literature explains the “knowledge–policy gap” through the structure of policy–research relationships, organizational logics of self-preservation, struggles over power and legitimacy within state bureaucracies, as well as political pressures stemming from issue salience. This knowledge use scholarship pays attention to how policy actors interpret, selectively use or disregard knowledge. However, it tends to consider knowledge as a given that policymakers just need to pick up, leaving aside the question of how policy knowledge is produced in the first place.

### *How Migration Policy Actors Produce Knowledge*

Research on knowledge production in migration policy making has developed largely in isolation from the knowledge use scholarship just discussed. It draws inspiration from Science and Technology Studies (STS), critical theory, and post-constructivist, interpretive policy analysis, which are united in their understanding that knowledge does “not only describe but also help to produce the social world” (Law 2004, 5). Epistemic practices are thus not “neutral” but inherently political and create “ontological politics” (Mol 1999) in that they construct reality in particular ways that require specific political actions. Central to these studies are questions of power and domination: How is policy knowledge reflective and productive of power relations? How, by whom and for what purpose is policy knowledge produced?

In this vein, migration scholars have studied how policy actors’ knowledge practices — e.g., producing reports, charts, statistics, or bureaucratic forms — shape how “migration” is perceived as a socio-political phenomenon (Carmel and Kan 2018; Amelung, Scheel, and van Reekum 2024). Concretely, this literature has flagged two key dynamics: (1) that power, in particular that of nation-states in the Global North, shapes policymakers’ epistemic practices and who gets to be seen as legitimate knowledge producer; and (2) that these epistemic practices, i.e., the tendency of state and policy actors to construct “migration” as a (security) problem or crisis, has ontological effects, as they delineate the universe of possible policy responses and thus justify the existence and intervention of specific policy actors.

First, drawing on Foucault (1977, 27) and his notion of power/knowledge, migration scholars have argued that knowledge on migration not only serves to legitimize state power but that, vice-versa, state power fundamentally shapes what knowledge is produced in the first place. For example, scholars have meticulously documented how nation states’ taxonomies create different migrant categories and how knowledge about these groups legitimizes unequal access to resources, inclusion, and exclusion (e.g., Yanow 2015; Massey 2007; De Genova 2013; Eule et al. 2019; Welfens 2021). They have shown how, for instance, classifying populations in bureaucratic forms as “foreigners” or “natives”, or based on their race and ethnicity (Yanow and van der Haar 2013), is a form of “making up populations” (Hacking 2006) and intrinsically related to state control.

This dominant state-centric perspective has consequences not only on *what* is considered “a policy problem” or not, but also on *who* is considered a legitimate

knowledge producer in migration policy. Drawing inter alia on decolonial theory, scholars have examined whose voices and perspectives are not heard and/or actively marginalized in policy making processes (Nieswand and Drotbohm 2014; Mayblin and Turner 2020). For instance, the perspectives of migrants and the expertise of civil society actors or institutions in the Global South are usually disregarded in European policy making (Dahinden, Fischer, and Menet 2021; Pastore and Roman 2020).

A second major insight of this literature concerns the “ontological effects” of knowledge production on migration. Specifically, studies have shown that it matters how policy problems are construed and communicated, as advancing certain problem statements crucially shapes what policy responses become imaginable and implementable (Geiger and Pécoud 2010; Bartels 2018; Allen et al. 2018; Bigo 2002). Huysmans (2000) for instance approached migration policy making itself as a form of knowledge production and showed how migration is construed as a crisis, a policy problem, and a threat to national security, economic order, and cultural security, thus justifying the securitization of migration policies.

Others have taken this line of inquiry one step further by showing how knowledge production legitimizes the existence and growth of particular policy actors. For instance, IOM’s international migration statistics foster a specific perception of migration “as a reality that can be managed because it can be precisely known and quantified” (Scheel and Ustek-Spilda 2019, 665), hereby legitimizing the existence of IOM as an institution. Similarly, Frontex’ data visualizations and risk reports on irregular border crossings construe migration as an existential threat. This legitimizes Frontex’ border control practices and the increasing financial support the organization receives (van Houtum and Bueno Lacy 2020; Stachowitsch and Sachseder 2019). It is thus not only through knowledge *use* but also through knowledge *production* that institutions actively legitimize their existence (Welfens and Bonjour 2023; Promsopha and Tucci 2023).

In sum, knowledge is not just an objective truth “out there” that, depending on institutional structures and political interests, policymakers pick up or disregard. Instead, knowledge is actively produced through the perspectives and power dynamics of policy actors. Unlike the knowledge use literature, which often attributes the “knowledge–policy gap” to institutional or organizational barriers, this perspective emphasizes how the unequal power dynamics inherent in migration governance shape what knowledge is created and deemed legitimate in the first place. What follows from these distinct approaches to knowledge and policy making are diverging self-understandings of our role as migration researchers, our relation to migration policy making and our very understanding of “impact”, which we turn to now.

## Looking Inwards

The outward-looking perspective provides important explanations for the “knowledge–policy gap”, but tells only part of the story. While reviewing and synthesizing

the literature on policy actors' knowledge practices, we were struck by the clear parallels to dynamics within migration studies. An inward-looking perspective that scrutinizes how we as migration scholars produce, use, and value knowledge is thus essential to fully understand the potential and obstacles for migration research impact.

We are all but alone in thinking about knowledge practices in migration studies. Discussions surrounding the fields' reflexivity (Dahinden, Fischer, and Menet 2021; Amelina 2021; Fiorito 2023), its neoliberal market dynamics (Stierl 2022; Vigneswaran 2024; Cabot 2019) and its inequalities and ethical challenges (Mayblin and Turner 2020; Fiddian-Qasmiyeh 2020; Amelina 2022; Nimführ 2022; Bloemraad and Menjivar 2022; Osseiran and Nimer 2024; Vanyoro 2024) have flourished recently alongside analyses of the expansion and institutionalization of migration studies (Pisarevskaya et al. 2019; Favell 2022; Piccoli, Ruedin, and Geddes 2023). However, these analyses have rarely put questions of research impact center-stage (except for Kalir and Cantat 2020; Alpes 2024). Based on this growing literature and our own observations of the dynamics structuring (European) migration studies since the early 2010s, in this section we first juxtapose knowledge use and production practices of policy actors with those of migration scholars to then show how the fragmentation and to some extent "academic tribalism" characterizing our field has created a self-sabotaging dynamic that jeopardizes the collective impact of migration research(ers).

### *How Migration Scholars Use and Produce Knowledge*

The first key insight from the literature discussed above was that policy actors often use knowledge selectively and symbolically to legitimize their position as decision-makers or support their pre-existing policy preferences. A similar dynamic can be observed within academia, where the "use" of (or reference to) existing academic knowledge is a highly symbolic endeavor that serves to position and legitimize one's own scholarly contribution. Citation practices and literature reviews that demarcate what specific academic communities consider valuable, legitimate scholarly work are powerful tools for such "boundary work" (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh 2020; Mott and Cockayne 2017; Reyes Cruz 2008; Gieryn 1983; Jasanoff 1987).<sup>6</sup> As Tupas and Tarrayo (2024, 1) write, doing a "literature review becomes violent in the Bourdieusian sense because it imposes particular configurations of privileged knowledge on researchers".

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<sup>6</sup>Such boundary work is both relevant for academic sub-fields to assert their authority and legitimacy as well as to demarcate scientific knowledge from expert knowledge produced by research units in ministries, international or non-governmental organizations (e.g. European Migration Network (EMN); EU Commission's Joint Research Center (JRC); IOM Research).

Citation practices are also a key indicator for the consolidation of distinct research fields: As Levy, Pisarevskaya, and Scholten (2020) show, between the mid-1970s and late 2000s, migration research evolved into an increasingly interconnected and self-referential network, whereby the overall likelihood of migration research to cite other migration research has strongly increased, also across disciplines. However, they observe that since around 2008 there is a stagnation and even decline of such self-referentiality and, thus, network density, for which they have no clear interpretation.<sup>7</sup> We suggest that this trend is driven by the increasing fragmentation of migration studies.

Since we started working on migration in the early 2010s, migration studies has diversified into ever-more fine-grained sub-fields along thematic or epistemological lines (e.g., forced migration studies, return migration studies, migration attitudes studies, mobilities studies, critical border studies, reflexive migration studies). These sub-fields have built their own epistemic communities with dedicated mailing lists, research networks, conference sections, or journals,<sup>8</sup> which “provide a measure of legitimacy, standing, and status for adherents” (Lake 2011, 469). The codes of such communities are often powerful: there are particular concepts one “ought to know”, people one “ought to cite”, institutions and questions one “ought to study”, and even positions one “ought to take” to show respect to and gain respect from the respective research community. While dialogue within each sub-field is vibrant, engagement with ideas and publications across them tends to be minimal. This observation is shared by Favell (2022, 5), who concludes in a recent review of the field that “migration studies has never been so fragmented or uncommunicative across sub-fields, even as” — or we would say precisely because—“it continues to grow and gain mainstream disciplinary recognition.”

This fragmentation has also affected us while writing this article: We sometimes felt uncomfortable to draw simultaneously from migration research across different “tribes”, for instance public administration and Science and Technology Studies, which both have their own lively scholarly communities but rarely share the same academic spaces (e.g., journals, conferences), let alone epistemological foundations. We also discussed at length whether and how to use specific concepts that are distinctively connected to one sub-field, such as policy impact and evidence-based policy making or resistance and power/knowledge. And we constantly paid attention to how we could make this article speak to different scholarly

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<sup>7</sup>They hypothesize that this “could be down to a lag effect in referencing, but it could also be an indication that, since 2008, migration studies are increasingly embedded in other fields, and develops less as a discrete research field” (Levy, Pisarevskaya, and Scholten (2020, 22).

<sup>8</sup>Examples include the creation of specialized journals such as *Migration and Development* (launched in 2012) or *International Journal of Migration and Border Studies* (launched in 2014) or new standing committees within the European network of migration scholars (IMISCOE), e.g. on Reflexivity or Gender and Sexuality, both created in 2019.

communities or “tribes” by connecting our work to particular debates, concepts, or scholars.

Obviously, this fragmentation and lacking dialogue across epistemological and other divides is partly rooted in the competitive character of neoliberal academia (Burton and Bowman 2022; Hyland and Jiang 2021; Kalfa, Wilkinson, and Gollan 2018). Competition dynamics incentivize scholars to carve out and legitimate their niche by constantly emphasizing—in papers, job or grant applications—how other scholars’ work is insufficient, biased or inadequate for the questions at hand.<sup>9</sup> These dynamics seem to be particularly acute in migration studies due to the increasing politicization of the issue and the concomitant increase in public funding and rapid growth of the field.

As the literature reviewed earlier highlighted, policy actors’ knowledge practices are not only guided by personal or institutional legitimization logics, but also by issue politicization. We argue that this also holds for scholarly knowledge practices, which are shaped by the political salience of research topics and broader theoretical trends and “turns” in the field. For instance, migration studies already underwent a “transnational turn” (Levitt and Jaworsky 2007), a “mobility turn” (Faist 2013), a “local turn” (Zapata-Barrero, Caponio, and Scholten 2017), and a “reflexive turn” (Amelina 2022); and the current hype around AI and big data will likely also leave its impact on migration studies.

Some of these trends are closely tied to funding opportunities, which tend to reflect state priorities. Europe’s 2015 “migration crisis” is a case in point, as it has led to a surge in research projects, papers, conferences, and study programs, many of which take as their starting point the categories and questions of (European) policymakers (Braun et al. 2018).<sup>10</sup> As a consequence, the Euro- and state-centric gaze that characterizes policy actors’ knowledge production also shapes scientific migration research, both in terms of substantive research focus and research infrastructure. For instance, there is substantively more academic research on highly politicized borders (e.g., the Mediterranean) or migrant groups (e.g., irregular migrants) compared to “policy-irrelevant” world regions or migrant groups perceived as less salient or “problematic” (Cabot 2019; Bakewell 2008). Also, research institutes remain geographically concentrated in the Global North (Piccoli, Ruedin, and

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<sup>9</sup>The multi-disciplinary nature of migration studies, which requires (early career) scholars to not only establish their voice within migration studies but also in reference to their respective disciplines that continue to hold power over academic careers in many university contexts, further exacerbates this (see also DeWind 2020, 3-6).

<sup>10</sup>It is important to note that EU and national funding agencies have also financed large-scale projects whose goals were to challenge the very foundations of European migration governance or to uncover violent practices at Europe’s borders. These projects often experience a tension between positioning themselves critically towards state agendas while simultaneously having to “prove” impact and relevance in their reporting to funders.

Geddes 2023) and Global North scholars continue to produce the vast majority of theoretical and cross-comparative knowledge. In contrast, Global South scholars often find themselves relegated to producing empirical knowledge on their own countries (Kabbanji 2014; Alatas 2003; Nimführ 2022; Osseiran and Nimer 2024) and remain underrepresented in scholarly publications (Vargas-Silva 2019; Neang, McNally, and Rahim 2022). Despite attempts to mitigate these asymmetries,<sup>11</sup> the mechanisms and power dynamics that shape policy actors' knowledge production still importantly structure what knowledge is being produced and whose knowledge is seen as legitimate within migration studies.

How migration scholars have positioned themselves towards this diagnosis of continued Western- and state-centrism in migration research is in itself exemplary for the fields' fragmentation. In the early 2000s, Wimmer and Glick Schiller (2002, 2003) have kick-started a debate on the state gaze through the notion of "methodological nationalism" that criticized migration scholars' tendency "to assume that the nation-state is the natural social and political form of the modern world." Since then, migration scholars have engaged very differently with this critique (see also DeWind 2020, 7–8; Anderson 2019): Some have started to challenge state categories by scrutinizing their origins and effects, leading to the emergence of a real sub-field within migration studies around the issue of categorization (e.g., Bakewell 2008; Dahinden, Fischer, and Menet 2021; Schinkel 2018; Yanow and van der Haar 2013). Another epistemic community emerged around an alternative approach, namely to completely reject the state-gaze by focusing on actors that contest migration control, such as NGOs, activists, or migrants (e.g., Scheel and Tazzioli 2022; Stierl 2018; Nimführ 2022; De Genova, Garelli, and Tazzioli 2018). Yet, large parts of migration scholarship continue to work (un)intentionally with state categories and within nation-state contexts—many precisely in order to be heard by policy actors and have impact on political debates or simply because nation states continue to structure social and political life writ large.

Migration studies also fragmented in reaction to the important debate around notions of "decentring" or "decolonizing" the field. For a long time, theories and empirical studies on migration focused almost exclusively on states in the Global North, while research on mobilities and population movements in the Global South tended to be relegated to Area Studies. This has reinforced—deliberately or not—a worldview in which migration is overwhelmingly conceived as the movement of people from the "poor, conflict-ridden Global South" towards the "rich, democratic Global North" (Natter and Thiollet 2022; Garcés-Masareñas 2018). Since the 2010s, a growing branch of migration scholarship has challenged these biases.

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<sup>11</sup> Some journals now have dedicated publishing support tracks for Global South scholars (e.g. *Migration Politics*; *International Political Sociology*) and some research associations are now intentionally organizing events at Global South institutions (e.g. IASFM).

Such studies have explored “South-South” migration, adopted de- and postcolonial approaches, and critiqued dichotomous concepts such as receiving/destination country or Global South/North (e.g., Natter 2023; Fiddian-Qasmiyeh 2020; Gisselquist and Tarp 2019; Nawyn 2016; El Qadim 2017; Crawley and Teye 2024). This emerging sub-field of migration studies has partially become a victim of its own success, as “decentring” is now a trendy topic in itself.<sup>12</sup> Despite this new vibrant research community, however, Western-centric political imaginaries, priorities, and actors continue to dominate large parts of migration research and publications (Levitt 2023; Amelung, Scheel, and van Reekum 2024; Vanyoro 2024).

What is key for our argument here is that this fragmentation has been accompanied by a lack of engagement with and appreciation of knowledge across these divides and sometimes even by dynamics of mutual de-legitimation. As the knowledge use literature reviewed earlier showed, knowledge can crumble or get lost in inter-institutional turf wars or power plays amongst policymakers. In our final section, we suggest that also in migration studies, potential societal or policy impact is lost because of an overt focus on the internal politics and distinctive competitive dynamics of scholarly sub-fields.

### *How “Academic Tribalism” Undermines Migration Scholars’ Collective Impact*

The fragmentation we identified not only affects how we as migration scholars produce and use knowledge, it also creates diverging understandings of the role that migration research(ers) should play in society and politics (see: Lacroix, Potot, and Schmoll 2021; Favell 2022; Alpes 2024). In (very!) simplistic and binary terms, we can distinguish a reformist from a revolutionary stance towards politics. *Reformists* consider knowledge as a resource that needs to be more effectively mobilized, presented, and used; it is about finding out what works and does not work in terms of engaging relevant stakeholders, optimizing knowledge transfers and fine-tuning interactions between scholars and policy actors. The fundamental belief is that knowledge is a key ingredient to change existing migration policies for the better, despite the limits imposed by the policy making process or dominant political interests. Critics of this reformist approach, however, characterize it as naïve and ignorant of the political nature of knowledge and reformist scholars at risk of being co-opted or instrumentalized for violent state agendas.

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<sup>12</sup>This can have two potentially negative consequences: that scholars might be tempted to pay lip service to this goal out of individual career considerations, and that the overt focus on “Southern” migration (further) reifies dichotomous political categories by homogenizing the “Global South” and essentializing its differences with the “Global North” (see also Haug, Braveboy-Wagner, and Maihold 2021).

In contrast, scholars taking on a *revolutionary* stance towards politics often question the broader system and political legitimacy of migration and border control as a whole. Based on their examinations and deconstructions of how power shapes knowledge production, they tend to be skeptical about researchers' attempts to generate "policy-relevant" research, provide recommendations, and join forces with policymakers. Some scholars strictly refuse any dialogue with policymakers and argue that participating in practitioner events already amounts to complicity with state violence. Instead of "hanging out" with policymakers, they prioritize coalition-building with migrant- and refugee-led organizations to resist against state actors. However, critics of the revolutionary approach highlight that their refusal to engage with those who hold power might entail abandoning political impact altogether. Furthermore, an over-emphasis on the constructed nature of knowledge might also backfire—why create knowledge at all, if it is always constructed, relative and coopted?

Crudely put, the revolutionaries are accused of only deconstructing without proposing concrete solutions and alternatives, while the reformers are accused of co-optation by the state and failure to resist repressive border regimes. Other migration scholars have suggested different labels for these distinct approaches to the research–politics relationship: Lacroix, Potot, and Schmoll (2021) differentiate between engaged researchers pursuing radical critique, expert researchers pursuing corrective critique, and theory-driven researchers operating epistemological critique; Alpes (2024) distinguishes between rejectionists/radical critics, monotorists/operational critics, and conditional reformers/comprehensive critics; and others have drawn the line between activist/critical migration scholarship and establishment/mainstream scholarship (see de Haas 2024; Favell 2022; Stierl 2022; Lindberg 2024). Regardless of labels, they all recognize the deep division within migration studies regarding conceptions of impact and relations to state actors and other practitioners.<sup>13</sup>

Obviously, this reform-revolution dichotomy is in reality a spectrum, and most migration scholars would probably position themselves somewhere in-between. However, this has become increasingly difficult, as the dynamics of fragmentation sketched above have led to so-called "academic tribalism" (Becher and Trowler 2001; Trowler, Saunders, and Bamber 2012) or "academic sectarianism" (Lake 2011). In this context, sub-fields of migration studies have tended to delegitimize each other's knowledge and efforts to achieve socio-political change rather than acknowledge their complementarity. This is not only our observation. Favell (2022, 6) has for instance identified a "dismissive relationship [...] between this

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<sup>13</sup> We do not suggest that the reform/revolutionary divide matches the positivist/constructivist or quantitative/qualitative methods divides that still shape social science (migration) research. While it might be tempting to equate the reformist stance with positivist approaches and quantitative methods, it also includes scholars working in a constructivist tradition and mobilizing qualitative methods; the opposite also exists within social science research but is less common in migration studies.

older neo-Weberian political sociology of immigration and nation-building, and the newer critical migration studies with its exposure of bordering, the selective and extractive injustices of immigrant and asylum policy". Indeed, Lindberg (2024, 6) observes that "scholars [...] drawing on decolonial and feminist theory are routinely dismissed in mainstream academia as 'activist', 'biased', and hence illegitimate", while Amelung, Scheel, and van Reekum (2024, 3) highlight that these same "scholars working from post- and decolonial perspectives" often "dismiss refugee and (forced) migration studies as academic disciplines that are dominated by interests and epistemic registers of the global North."

As a consequence, scholars' individual position on the reform-revolution spectrum is seen as a feature of their academic identity and signal of allegiance to a specific scholarly community (or tribe), rather than a conscious decision about the most appropriate impact strategies that they can take each time anew, depending on the research project or audience at stake. Framing the different approaches to politics as a dichotomy rather than as a spectrum, then, allows us to capture our personal unease with having to "take sides" and position ourselves definitively on this spectrum in order to "belong" to a specific scholarly community (or tribe), have a voice and be seen as legitimate knowledge producers.

Importantly, we argue that this "tribalism" undermines the overall credibility of migration research(ers) in the public sphere and thus the potential collective impact our knowledge can have. For example, for those more on the revolutionary side of the impact spectrum, it is particularly problematic when migration researchers—within and outside academia—uncritically take over policymakers' problematizations of migration in their own research. This concerns for instance references to the "problems" of "immigrant integration", "illegal migration", or the "migration-security nexus". Of course, as people whose job it is to study migration, no matter what methods we employ and how reflexive we are, we inevitably co-construct "refugees", "climate migration", "integration", etc. as social and political realities—and thus partly as problems that require (our) expertise. However, some migration scholars have actively critiqued the fact that some of their colleagues do not only *reproduce* states' epistemic practices but also *co-produce* "migration" as a policy problem. For instance, Schinkel (2018) has criticized immigrant integration research for reproducing racialized dichotomies between "Us" and "Them" and narratives of immigrants as "forever arriving" (Boersma and Schinkel 2018) and Stierl (2022, 1095) has condemned "mainstream migration studies' perpetuation of statistical migration spectacles". By using categories that reflect colonial legacies and Western-centric perspectives, such research—they argue—solidifies hierarchies and exclusion dynamics.

While demonstrating impact does not require aligning with state agendas, it often involves engaging with state priorities, vocabularies, and perspectives to make impact "legible" to policy audiences and other stakeholders. This often inadvertently reinforces state-driven categories and frames. Yet, also analyses that deconstruct policymakers' framing of migration and question their own categories of analysis can inadvertently reinforce those very worldviews. For example, while migration and

security studies scholarship has effectively shown how migration was securitized after 9/11 (see Huysmans and Squire 2009), scholarly concepts such as the “migration-security nexus” or “cimmigration” may unintentionally reinforce the connection between migration and security. Similarly, as Lindberg (2024) argues, research on the violence perpetrated at Europe’s borders has been essential to make such violence visible and hold state actors accountable, but its damage-centred focus also risks to reproduce the dehumanization of people on the move. Thus, while many migration researchers aim to challenge the construction of migration as a problem or crisis, migration studies as a field—including its more reflexive strands—is struggling to isolate itself from such representations and not unintentionally contribute to them.

We argue that such internal epistemological divides can backfire given the wider context of post-truth politics, in which the value of knowledge and expertise is fundamentally challenged. Specifically, such “tribal” dynamics can undermine the collective legitimacy and credibility of migration scholars in the public sphere, who can be more easily pitted against each other, thus reinforcing cherry-picking and misuse of scholarly knowledge.<sup>14</sup> To some extent, migration scholars thus stand in their own way when it comes to impact, as the dominant practices of selectively engaging with existing knowledge or delegitimizing impact strategies of other sub-fields ultimately self-sabotages migration studies’ overall impact in politics or society. We conclude with a reflection on how we as intellectual community might productively respond to the diagnosis in this paper by sketching three scenarios for the future of migration studies in terms of its institutionalization and collective impact.

## **Conclusion: Three Scenarios for Migration Research**

Why does migration research have so little impact? Our motivation behind writing this paper was to take a step back and consider what we can realistically expect our research to “do” given the political and institutional constraints of the field which we operate in. We wanted to review what, as migration scholars, we know

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<sup>14</sup>A particularly salient example at the time of writing was the debate around the UK-Rwanda and Italy-Albania deals on the outsourcing of asylum procedures, in which migration scholars heatedly and publicly debated the potential effects and risks of such proposals. In such debates, scholars also often challenged each other’s scientific knowledge base and scholarly authority. This, in turn, made it easier for politicians to dismiss scholarly authority altogether or to underpin their positions by selectively drawing on specific scientific knowledge. See for instance: <https://www.profil.at/ausland/das-ruanda-modell-ist-der-weg-zu-einem-humaneren-asyssystem/402904235>; <https://theconversation.com/uk-plan-to-send-asylum-seekers-to-rwanda-may-never-happen-but-other-european-leaders-still-want-to-copy-it-podcast-232839>; <https://www.nzz.ch/schweiz/weshalb-migrationsexperte-ruud-koopmans-der-schweiz-zu-einem-rwanda-deal-raet-damit-koennte-sie-ihre-humanitaere-tradition-staerken-ld.1829770>, all last accessed 17 July 2024.

about how knowledge on migration is produced and used in policy making. We wanted to learn from different groups of scholars who seemed animated by the desire to make a difference with their research and improve people's lives, but who took different roads towards this aim.

Reviewing the literature and identifying the main knowledge use and production mechanisms at play in migration policy making inspired us to reflect more systematically on our own knowledge practices in migration studies. These show striking parallels, such as the dominance of institutional or individual self-preservation logics or the importance of issue salience in determining what knowledge is produced, heard and valued. In particular, we argued that the tendency of migration studies in recent years to fragment into ever-more specific sub-fields reduces the potential for scientific appreciation across epistemic sub-communities. Coupled with the general competitive, neo-liberal character of academia, this in turn diverts academic energy towards internal politics and the de-legitimation of alternative research approaches.

This fragmentation also characterizes migration scholars' understandings of research impact. However, instead of leveraging the complementarity between reformers and revolutionaries, such competing visions have become self-undermining for migration studies as a whole, as dynamics of "academic tribalism" have weakened the voice and credibility of migration scholars in socio-political debates. The lacking impact or growing "knowledge-policy gap" are thus not that puzzling if we consider both the knowledge practices characterizing migration policy making and those dominating migration research.

Returning to the ambition of this Anniversary Special Issue to "self-reflect on the state of migration research", what can or should we as migration scholars do with this diagnosis? We end with sketching three possible scenarios for the future of migration studies—dissolution, sclerosis and reinvigoration—and what they would mean in terms of impacting "reality out there".

The first scenario is dissolution, which entails embracing the current fragmentation of migration studies and not pursuing the ambition to further institutionalize the field. This scenario is advocated by migration scholars who have become critical of the field's core ontological foundations, namely the very focus on "migration" as object of study (Anderson 2019; Dahinden 2016; Vigneswaran 2024; Raghuram, Breines, and Gunter 2024). For instance, Dahinden (2016) proposes to "de-migranticize" migration research by more closely integrating it into broader social science theories as well as by studying migration as a secondary question within societal processes. Vigneswaran (2024) pleads for abandoning migration studies as a field and redirecting material and intellectual resources to emerging parallel fields, such as mobility studies, carceral geographies or border studies. While this scenario seems rather unlikely given the strong institutional path dependencies and self-preservation dynamics discussed earlier, it could—if realized—lead to a productive reorientation of knowledge production, to conceptual reframing and thus to alternative ways of impacting political and social debates on people's (im)mobilities.

The second scenario is sclerosis,<sup>15</sup> or the hardening of tribal boundaries and epistemological conflicts, which would reinforce competitive dynamics and mutual de-legitimization. Given political developments in vast parts of the globe, characterized by populist rhetoric, skepticism towards scientific knowledge and disinvestment in higher education and research, it is likely that university careers will become more precarious and access to research funding more competitive (Burton and Bowman 2022; Hyland and Jiang 2021; Kalfa, Wilkinson, and Gollan 2018). Coupled with the continued socio-political polarization around migration, this could reinforce current dynamics of academic tribalism in migration studies, with detrimental consequences for the credibility of migration research(ers) in the public sphere. However, recent conversations among migration scholars on impact, knowledge use, and knowledge production in migration studies raise hope that a third scenario is possible.

This third scenario would be reinvigoration, with the goal of recovering our sense of collectivity as migration scholars and developing mutually-reinforcing knowledge practices. We do not think that migration scholars need to speak with one cohesive voice to be heard. This would also not be desirable, as plural epistemologies, theoretical perspectives and knowledge dissemination approaches are a strength. Indeed, different impact strategies can be complementary, especially if they build on each other and acknowledge the value of alternative approaches. However, as this paper showed, this is currently not the dominant dynamic in the field. To move in this direction, colleagues have suggested that migration scholars should shift from the currently defensive stance in the “competition for epistemic authority” towards an offensive, reflexive relationship with non-academic knowledge production (Amelung, Scheel, and van Reekum 2024, 4–5) or that they should build innovative knowledge alliances to “overcome the deadlock between unactionable resistance and uncritical impact” (Alpes 2024, 11). Others suggest that common ground might be found between different “tribes” of migration scholars by shifting the focus from engaging either policymakers or societal resistance actors towards addressing the general public. Such an impact strategy should focus on alternative stories to “equip the largest possible audiences with the deep knowledge that will enable them to critically scrutinize claims made” about migration (de Haas 2024, 22).

We think most migration scholars would agree that we need knowledge to understand the world around us and that this knowledge should inform how we deal with this world and help us to improve people’s lives. If this is indeed common ground amongst migration scholars, then we hope that the diagnosis in this paper can be a

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<sup>15</sup>In his work on collective action and interest groups, Olson (1982) argues that the multiplication of interest groups in society favors rent-seeking behaviour and vested interests, which leads to institutional sclerosis and ultimately jeopardizes economic growth and societal development. We translate this dynamic to migration studies, suggesting that the increase of sub-fields can have a sclerotic effect on scholarly dialogue and the field’s wider impact.

first step to bring the agency of migration research(ers) back into the impact debate, to proactively communicate across epistemological divides despite countervailing institutional incentives and to abandon self-sabotaging knowledge practices. Looking ahead, IMR's 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary might be a good occasion to take stock and assess which of the three scenarios prevailed. By then, we might also know whether we as intellectual community succeeded in turning our own knowledge practices from an obstacle into an asset for amplifying the role of migration knowledge in public life.

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