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Un/commoning Migration Studies and Decolonization as Distinction



Photograph by Marissa Macipe y del Amo. From an old market hall in Frankfurt, “Ausländische Spezialitäten” (foreign specialities), which could also be a good description for

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Anthropology.

When we, the speakers of the Working Group (AG) Migration, first read the DGSKA call for participation on the theme of 'Un/commoning', we felt that this concept could open up new directions in the debate on decolonizing Migration Studies from an anthropological perspective. In fact, it remains difficult for us to define precisely what is meant by 'decolonizing migration'. Perhaps it is even better not to defined it too narrowly, in order not to "uncommon" and exclude attempts and approaches that claim to contribute to this debate. In our call for participation at the roundtable, we introduced a powerful and utopian example of what we imagine as one of the central goals of decolonizing migration. That is, the abolition of borders, and consequently the dissolution of many dominant and colonial divides, such as, the migration–mobility divide (Schapendonk, 2021), the migrant–citizen divide (Sharma, 2020a, 2020b) and the researched–researcher divide (Nimführ, 2022). Our example is inspired by the idea of sharing a common planet and a common world, as well as by De Genova's statement: "If there were no borders, there would be no migration—only mobility" (De Genova, 2017: 6). We understand that challenging these divides, and many others, is possible through the lens of 'un/commoning'. Imagining the future of Migration Studies, or to be more realistic, our hopes for it, is the focus of our roundtable discussion. The aim of this blog contribution is to reflect on the chances and challenges of thinking about the future of Migration Studies through 'un/commoning'. Before doing so, please bear in mind that our "utopian" goal and imagination is that, in the future, there will be no need for Migration Studies at all.
A common understanding of 'un/commoning migration' refers to the practices of creating shared spaces, networks and relations, as well as resources and infrastructures of migration. At the same time, it highlights processes of exclusion, dispossession, fragmentation and the production of (un)deservingness of migrants (Fontanari, 2022). In our reflection, we extend this understanding to include and to think of the aforementioned divides and their exclusionary dynamics as a way of

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decolonization of research and of meanings of migration. We see these three divides as strongly overlapping and interrelated.

We want to reflect here on two patterns or dominant narratives: First, in both public and academic debates, migration is still dominantly framed in negative terms and connotations. In the Global North, it is often depicted as a threat to the "values" of the receiving society, a burden on social welfare systems, and a challenge to state sovereignty. Academic debates take a more nuanced and sometimes sympathetic approach, yet often still reproduce the image of migration as a crisis. While many studies focus on migrants' agency, they underline discrimination and racialization of migrants, vulnerability and special needs of refugees as well, and border regimes. Migrants in those studies are dominantly non-white persons moving from the Global South to the Global North, whether "il/legally" and "ir/regularly", or migrating between countries in the Global South. The term 'ir/regular' is often promoted as more politically correct, neutral, or avoiding states and policymakers' gaze, yet it does not help challenging state's monopoly of legality and legitimacy. In fact, the term "ir/regular migration" has been recently appropriated by policy makers, for instance in Germany, as a mere synonymous of "il/legal" without changing how migrants are perceived and treated.

Meanwhile, few scholars focus on white persons from the Global North MIGRATING from one country to another. The white privileged person is not framed as a migrant but is usually labelled "expatriate" or "mobile person". As if migration is solely perpetuated by people from the Global South, while people from the North do not migrate, they are mobile persons, or create specific subfields in Migration Studies, such as the so-called "life-style migration" and "international retirement migration". Such distinction further re/produce the divide between the poor vulnerable Southerners on the move and the privileged white mobile persons from the North. The latter, when seeking a betterment in their life, are usually depicted as expats, digital-nomads, lifestyle migrants seeking better lives abroad. While those from the Global South, who might have similar motives are considered "regular migrants". This bifurcation of migration continues dominant South-North hierarchizations

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along the line of vulnerability, racialization, legal status and deservingness of protection, exemplified in the term “economic migrant”, questing the justification of migrations; something we hope not to write about it anymore in the future.
The second dominant narrative or pattern is the tendency and advocacy of many anthropologists to give voice to migrants and to seek to impact their lives, for instance through policy-driven research, further exacerbates these divides. Here, Albert Camus’ saying “…good intentions may do as much harm as malevolence, if they lack understanding” seems apt. Reproducing “legal” migration categories (Bakewell, 2008), or inserting some “foreign” words to ethnographies as a proof of mastering the language by including the emic perspective of the research participants without actively trying to search for alternative analytical concepts and theories, are examples of examples of damaging good intentions. Furthermore, doing research with privileged persons is often dismissed as uninteresting, or insufficiently activist or leftist. Adding to this, especially for anthropologists, it is not “exotic” enough to do research at home with and on white privileged persons. Such practices are directly linked to the colonial legacy of anthropology, with its traditional focus on non-Western societies, that is the “Other”. Indeed, the discipline was accused of avoiding dealing with inequalities and racism, especially in the West (Fernando, 2014). Furthermore, some anthropological institutes when presenting the discipline on their homepages make a distinction between ‘Social and Cultural Anthropology’ and ‘European Social and Cultural Anthropology’. This implies that doing “real” anthropology was traditionally and still is dominantly outside Europe or non-Western people. But it is also true, that there were calls for doing anthropology at home, including in Europe. Nevertheless, the anthropological research at home would normally be with and on the “other” non-European and non-White. What, then, about anthropologists from the Global South? With or on whom should, or could they conduct research? What resources are available to them?
Surely by looking at the border regimes, in particular the difficulties of receiving visas for visits and residencies in a country in the Global North, it means that for Southern anthropologists are not meant to be doing ‘European Social and Cultural

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Anthropology'. For the "lucky" ones, originally from the South, who happened to receive their training in the Global North, or "halfies" educated in the West, as Abu-Lughod (1991) call them, find themselves (un)consciously choosing to do research with their "imagined" community affiliation as "insider researcher" (Diallo & Zafer, 2025). Being an "insider researcher" is probably their only way to be considered as "real anthropologist", who researches the non-Western, whether in their country, often as a consultant doing applied anthropology (Pelican, Zafer, & Bollig, 2025), or in Europe researching non-Western migrant communities. It is sadly much less common that anthropologists from the Global South research whites or the Europeans, whether due to immigration restrictions or to the colonial legacy of Anthropology.

In the field of Migration Studies, besides the good intention of giving voice and supporting migrant communities, many would argue that researching the "migrants" and not the "mobile ones" is more relevant in terms of patterns, scale and socio-cultural and political impacts. Hence, suggestions, especially from Southern scholars, to include white persons as research participants in the research design is uncommon and hardly accepted by fellow colleagues and funding organizations. Do you know that, for example, in 2016, Germany not only witnessed the biggest numbers of arrivals of refugees but also a record in emigration of German citizens since 1991? (Statistisches Bundesamt June 2025). Hungary has become a key hub for German migrants since then, also driven by antimigration policies in Germany (Mercédesz, 2025). Is this migration pattern irrelevant? Is it that white German citizens cannot represent a threat to the hosting societies and are not required to integrate and contribute to the destination country, nevertheless? The example shows, that also the German migrants, however, raise new questions over "integration" and the long-term impact of their migration on the Hungarian society. However, if white European people overstay their visa and, according to immigration and border regimes in the Global North, become "illegal" migrants, there will be no public outcry, as they will just pay a small fee for overstaying. For most white European migration anthropologists this is not a topic worth studying, however.

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Some would also consider such an endeavor not even anthropological, but rather sociological, as it does not entail travels to exotic places and fieldwork on non-industrial and "primitive" societies.
We argue that decolonizing Migration Studies and Anthropology must include the normality, not just the possibility, of Southern scholars researching Northerners and conducting research in the Global North. We do not need an impostor of decolonial approaches into our research without feeling and understanding its importance. This begins with making conferences accessible to people, particularly those with limited resources in the South and North, and particularly those who cannot pass the European border regime. However, barrier-free, democratic exchange can only be a first step. At the same time, we do not need white European anthropologists who feel forced to follow such approaches just because decolonization has in recent years become the "trend" to follow. We surely also do not need decolonization in the Global North, which makes use of the concept as an academic fashion or distinction, in Bourdieu's (1984) terms, nor a tool for Northern institutions to signal superiority in collaborations. What we need for Migration Studies is an honest and substantial reconsideration (Khosravi, 2024), similar to the concept of "post-migrant societies" (Foroutan, 2016; Tsianos & Karakayali, 2014). What we need might be critical Post-Migration Studies, in which we work towards dissolving divides divides—migration vs. mobility, migrant vs. citizen, researcher vs. researched—as a commoning endeavor.

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