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# Environment and Planning C: Politics and Space

## Do No Harm? The Impact of Policy on Migration Scholarship

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Keywords:	Policy-relevant scholarship, migration 'crisis', migration knowledge hype, impact agenda, harm
Abstract:	<p>The mass migrations of 2015 were not merely a watershed moment for 'EUrope' but also for the scholarly study of migration to EUrope. With academic expertise and insights becoming much sought-after in the media and political discourse, migration scholarship has gained in unknown popularity over recent years. This current 'migration knowledge hype' has particularly benefited scholarship that claims to be of relevance for EUropean policymakers in finding responses to 'migratory pressures'. This article critically interrogates the increasing intimacy between the worlds of migration scholarship and migration policy and seeks to unpack how the quest for policy-relevance has shaped the process of research itself. The impact of policy on migration research can be discerned when policy categories, assumptions, and needs constitute the bases and (conceptual) frames of research that seeks to be legible to policymakers. However, with EUropean migration policies causing devastation and undeniably harmful effects on migrant lives, what is the responsibility of researchers for the knowledge they produce and disseminate? Should the 'do no harm' principle prevalent in the migration discipline be expanded to also include the potentially harmful consequences resulting from research made relevant to migration policymakers? This article makes the case for an engaged scholarship that does not shy away from intervening in the contested field of migration with the intention not to fix but to amplify the epistemic and other crises of the EUropean border regime.</p>

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## Introduction<sup>i</sup>

What is regularly referred to as 2015's 'migration crisis' can be regarded as a watershed moment for Europe, triggering a range of dramatic reconfigurations that both threatened *and* rejuvenated the 'European project'.<sup>ii</sup> While conflicts among EU member states and institutions continue over the governing of migratory movements and questions of reception or the 'fair' relocation of newcomers, and while the union has shrunk in light of the UK's withdrawal in 2020, the migrant arrivals portrayed and treated as an emergency also reinforced processes of 'Europeanisation'. Despite all conflicts and Euro-scepticism there appears to be consensus among member states and institutions that 2015's mass intrusions into European space would need to remain a singular and exceptional historic episode, an anomaly never to repeat itself. In order to guarantee its exceptionality, the collective quest to discipline unauthorised migrations and to strengthen Europe's border architecture as a whole, has deepened existing and fostered novel European collaborations, alliances, and spaces (Rigo 2018; Stierl 2020a). A plethora of new or reinforced policies on migration have seen the day of light, with Hein de Haas et al (2019: 901) defining such policies "as rules (i.e., laws, regulations, measures, and procedures) that national states enact with the explicit objective of affecting the volume, origin, direction, and composition of migration." Certainly, in the European context, as elsewhere, not only nation states create or enact these rules but also supra-national institutions, agencies, and international organisations.

The migration movements across the Mediterranean Sea and the Balkans in 2015 and early 2016 not only prompted "alarmist reactions [that] have largely served to justify the necessity of new 'emergency' policies and the deployment of new means of control" (New Keywords 2016: 7-8), they also prompted a thirst for knowledge on migration. 2015 was thus also a watershed moment for European migration scholarship, with academic expertise and insights becoming much sought-after in the media and political discourse. In an editorial of the journal *Movements*, focussed on "the contested knowledge production of migration", Katherine Braun et al. (2018: 9) speak of a veritable "migration knowledge hype." Hitherto a rather modest academic sub-field, migration and border scholarship has gained in unknown popularity over recent years, with new institutes, teaching programmes, journals, and academic networks surfacing. The 'crisis' prompted a "blossoming crisis industry" (Rozakou 2019: 80) and has, as Enrica Rigo (2018: 507) observes, "become a tool of knowledge and expertise production" as well as "an object of calls for research funding."

Novel funding opportunities have emerged in particular for research with purported relevance for policymakers who would use such "research when designing or implementing policies or in decision making" (Scholten 2018: 289). In the UK, for example, the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC 2015, 2017: 5) provided funding in 2015 as a "response to the on-going migration crisis" and with the aim to "provide evidence to inform the development of policy and responses by governments, European agencies, and charities", concluding two years later that the findings had succeeded in "influencing government and agency responses to the crisis." In Germany also, funding for research projects and institutes increased significantly after 2015, with the Federal Ministry of Education and Research (BMBF 2016) announcing in 2016 to provide 18 million Euro for the "advancement of migration research." Produced research findings, according to the ministry, should be quickly implemented, so that the applicability of research would be of great significance. Entirely new research institutes have come about, such as the Interdisciplinary Centre for Integration and Migration Research (InZentIM) or the German Centre for Integration- and Migration Research (DeZIM) both of which opened in 2017.

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3 On a European level and as a “response to the refugee crisis”, the European Commission  
4 (2016) announced in 2016 to release eleven million Euro for “new research to understand  
5 migration but also to develop effective policies for managing the influx and integrating  
6 migrants in the society and economy.” *Horizon 2020*, the “biggest EU Research and Innovation  
7 programme” (European Commission 2018a), set out in its work programme 2018-2020 “to  
8 address the concerns of the European citizens regarding migration” and called for policy-  
9 relevant projects. The research on migration’s “flows, drivers, attitudes and behaviours” should  
10 “inform evidence-based governance and regulatory frameworks”, “contribute to developing  
11 migration governance structures, policies and instruments”, “assist European policymakers”,  
12 and “enhance policy responses” (European Commission 2018b: 7-14).

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16 On a ‘global’ level, though in reality often referring to “institutes in, and academics originating  
17 from, the global North”, the desire for academic knowledge on migration has also manifested  
18 in the recent “rapid proliferation in the number of research centres, policy institutes, journals,  
19 websites, conferences, and workshops” (Crisp 2018: 641; Banerjee 2012). The Global Compact  
20 on Refugees, affirmed by the United Nations General Assembly in December 2018 and meant  
21 to provide “a blueprint for governments, international organizations, and other stakeholders to  
22 ensure that host communities get the support they need and that refugees can lead productive  
23 lives”, declared the creation of

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26 A global academic network on refugee, other forced displacement, and statelessness issues  
27 [...], involving universities, academic alliances, and research institutions, together with  
28 UNHCR and other relevant stakeholders, to facilitate research, training and scholarship  
29 opportunities which result in specific deliverables in support of the objectives of the global  
30 compact. (UNHCR 2018: 8)

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33 The current migration knowledge hype thus constitutes also a migration policy hype –  
34 “academics and other knowledge workers” are recruited, Peter Nyers (2019: 174) notes, in  
35 order to provide ‘specific deliverables’ to migration policymakers.

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38 Certainly, the “progressive hybridisation of science and policy” (Bandola-Gill 2019: 896) and  
39 the desire for policy-relevant research can be observed far beyond the migration discipline.  
40 Policy-relevance has become, as Richard Jackson (2016: 124) critically argues, “the gold  
41 standard and pinnacle of academic practice”. Christina Boswell and Katherine Smith (2017: 2)  
42 have shown how doing research that is relevant in the sphere of policymaking has been  
43 incentivised through an “emphasis on ‘research impact’ [which] has been increasing steadily  
44 across a number of OECD countries over the past decade.” In light of this development and the  
45 growth of the ‘impact agenda’, Harmonie Toros (2016: 126, emphasis in original) worries that  
46 “the famous ‘so what’ question asked about any research has gone from meaning ‘how does  
47 this contribute to knowledge?’ to ‘how does this contribute to knowledge *and* how can it have  
48 relevance beyond academia, including in the policy world?’” Toros fears “that there may come  
49 a dreadful day when the first question is marginalised in favour of the second.”

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53 With the growth of the migration discipline, important new insights into the circumstances and  
54 dynamics of precarious migration and its governance have been won. As a researcher of  
55 migration myself, I would be the last to lament the fact that the question of migration has  
56 become of central importance in the social sciences and beyond, generating productive  
57 interdisciplinary exchanges, conceptual advances as well as, indeed, novel funding  
58 opportunities. What I do seek to critically explore in this article is the growing intimacy  
59 between the worlds of migration scholarship and migration policy given the current migration  
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3 knowledge hype. What this article proposes is that the, at times, flattering interest of EUropean  
4 policymakers in scholarship and the idea of having an impact ‘in the real world’ has given  
5 further rise to a scholarship that risks ascribing to, rather than critically interrogating, “the  
6 paradigm of an all-encompassing governance of mobility and [...] the fantasies [it] entails and  
7 engenders” (Garelli and Tazzioli 2013a: 247). In a nutshell, the article wonders whether the  
8 migration discipline has succumbed to “the ruling order of policy” (Ranci re 1992: 62) so that  
9 the ‘dreadful day’ has already come where the quest for policy relevance has altered the  
10 meaning of the famous ‘so what?’ question.  
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14 The article is organised into four main parts. Part I draws parallels between the scholarly fields  
15 of terrorism and migration studies which were both propelled to the forefront of public debate  
16 and policy interest in light of unforeseen political events that seemed to challenge the existing  
17 political order. Part II explores the impact of policy on migration scholarship and highlights  
18 the problematic tendencies in policy-relevant research to adapt a priori to policy categories,  
19 assumptions, and needs. Part III alludes to the harm caused by EUropean migration policies  
20 and raises the question whether the ‘do no harm’ principle prevalent in migration research  
21 should be expanded to also include the potentially harmful consequences of research made  
22 relevant to migration policymakers. Part IV makes the case for different forms of ‘impact’  
23 through migration research and highlights three ways of contributing through scholarship:  
24 epistemic interventions, counter-empirics, and activist engagement.  
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## 28 29 I. Learning from the Terrorism Knowledge Hype

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31 The so-called ‘crisis’ over EUrope-bound migration has generated a rapidly growing desire,  
32 and market, for scholarly knowledge on migration, not dissimilar to the way in which the 9/11  
33 attacks in 2001 had elevated the discipline of terrorism studies. Without doubt, in the aftermath  
34 of these events, both terrorism studies and migration studies, *as disciplines*, have profited  
35 considerably. Migration, since 2015, has become a “growth industry” akin to terrorism after  
36 9/11 when “thousands of new books and articles [were] published on terrorism every year,  
37 along with an even greater corpus of cultural texts in the form of novels, media articles, and  
38 movies” (Breen Smyth et al 2008: 1). Though it seems more than questionable to consider the  
39 “refugee crisis [...] Europe’s 9/11” (Krastev 2018), similarities do exist in the ways in which  
40 events that seemed to radically rupture the presumed stability of the existing political order  
41 created the need for scholarly expertise that could be of use for policy responses. Can the  
42 migration discipline learn from the experiences made by (critical) terrorism scholars in dealing  
43 with counter-terrorism policymakers?  
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47 In 2016, around the time when hundreds of thousands crossed EUrope’s borders, scholars  
48 associated with Critical Terrorism Studies (CTS) debated the “complex relationship” between  
49 the discipline and policy-relevance and explored researchers’ potentially “unhealthy proximity  
50 to the state” (Fitzgerald, Ali, and Armstrong 2016: 1). From the onset, the sub-field of *Critical*  
51 *Terrorism Studies* had positioned itself against “the (perceived) ontological, epistemological,  
52 and ideological commitments of existing terrorism studies” (Breen Smyth et al 2008: 2). As an  
53 intervention within a booming field, CTS aspired to lay open and critically interrogate “the  
54 biases and practices currently present in the field”, promote greater self-reflexivity in research,  
55 and offer a scholarly ‘home’ for those unwilling to publish in “‘terrorism industry’ journals.”  
56 Despite their critique of mainstream terrorism studies’ policy-driven nature, CTS scholars were  
57 not necessarily opposed to producing scholarship relevant to policymakers, at least not at first.  
58 As Jackson, Marie Breen Smyth and Jeroen Gunning (2009: 236) argued in 2009:  
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4 we feel that the current political and intellectual climate, in which there is growing  
5 disappointment with the effects and outcomes to date of the ‘war on terror’, and where  
6 security practitioners are actively searching for new ideas and approaches to thinking about  
7 counterterrorism, provides a ripe moment for critically-oriented scholars to offer their  
8 knowledge and expertise.  
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11 Several years later, when looking back at CTS interventions in terrorism studies in a 2016  
12 special issue of *Critical Studies on Terrorism*, some of the founding scholars were divided on  
13 what had been, or could be, achieved through policy-relevant terrorism scholarship. The  
14 dilemma whether to “engage, or circumvent” was examined in the context of “the prevailing  
15 research environment in which academics are falling under increasing pressure to demonstrate  
16 the societal *impact* of their work which in the social sciences, is heavily tied to demonstrating  
17 policy-relevance” (Fitzgerald, Ali, and Armstrong 2016: 2, emphases in original).  
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21 In a self-reflective article, Toros (2016: 126) voices concern about the “little institutional  
22 discussion of the ethics of impact” and the potential of harm caused by research. Despite such  
23 quarrels, Toros (2016: 127, emphasis in original) makes the case that critical researchers should  
24 engage in dialogue with both state actors and terrorists since “*all* agents are capable of change  
25 and transformation.” In contrast, Jackson (2016: 121) feels it was “a little naïve” to believe that  
26 CTS scholars “could balance access to policymakers and having policy relevance with  
27 prioritising human security, critiquing the use of violence (including by the state), the  
28 promotion of nonviolence, ‘outsider theorising’, and anti-hegemony.” This naivety, for him,  
29 rests “on a series of implicit assumptions about states as benign institutions and policymaking  
30 as a fairly open, rational process” – assumptions that could no longer be maintained in light of  
31 a radical “mutation of counterterrorism from a fairly narrowly-defined set of security measures  
32 designed to deal with the threat of sub-state political violence in individual states, to a  
33 monstrous global machine.” This global machine of counter-terrorism, Jackson suggests, has  
34 turned into a regime that “is, in its philosophy, practice, and effects, inherently violent,  
35 oppressive, and life-diminishing; it is a set of practices that is deeply anti-emancipatory, anti-  
36 human, and regressive.” Consequently, it would be illusory to believe that engagements with  
37 counter-terrorism policymakers could have emancipatory effects.  
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42 Assessing whether or not CTS has succeeded or failed in balancing access to power and a  
43 critical distance to it would go beyond the scope of this article but it is safe to say that the  
44 question of policy-relevance remains one of the most pressing, and difficult, issues the  
45 discipline faces. The introspections in CTS are relevant for (critical) migration studies as both  
46 disciplines experienced a drastic increase in policy-interest after events deemed world-altering  
47 crises in the Global North. They also feel pertinent given that (state and media) responses to  
48 terrorism have become increasingly interlinked with responses to migration, and vice versa.  
49 Over the past decades, as Jef Huysmans (2000: 760) notes, counter-terrorism efforts have  
50 regularly coalesced with efforts to counter unauthorised migration, thus producing a “security  
51 continuum connecting border control, terrorism, international crime and migration.”  
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55 In particular since 2015, migrant movements have frequently been depicted as “an amorphous  
56 ‘invasion’ of migrants or refugees re-figured as potential ‘terrorists’” (New Keywords 2016:  
57 9). Rumours that “Islamic State (IS) fighters are being smuggled into Europe by gangs in the  
58 Mediterranean” circulated widely (BBC 2015). In the aftermath of the 2015 Paris attacks,  
59 suggestions by France’s prime minister Manuel Valls that some of the terrorists had used the  
60 ‘crisis’ to “slip in” undetected made the rounds (Guardian 2015), despite the fact that the

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3 attackers were nearly exclusively EU citizens. Nevertheless, border security measures within  
4 the Schengen Area and at Europe's external frontiers intensified in the aftermath of the attacks.  
5 In the US also, the figure of the 'migrant terrorist' was conjured up. President Donald Trump,  
6 who repeatedly blamed the 'migration crisis' for having "changed the fabric of Europe" (New  
7 York Post 2018), suggested that "We have terrorists coming through the southern border  
8 because they find that's probably the easiest place to come through" (Associated Press 2019).  
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11 In view of such security continuum entangling terrorism and migration "as though their  
12 association were quite natural" (Walters 2002: 570), the same individuals and groups racialised  
13 as 'other' regularly happen to be targeted by both counter-terrorism and 'counter-migration'  
14 discourses and measures (Maira 2016). Security policies executed in the name of counter-  
15 terrorism have led to "increased insecurity amongst migrant and ethnic minority populations  
16 in the West, and particularly among those from Muslim majority countries or long-settled  
17 Muslim and ethnic minority communities" (Lazaridis and Wadia 2015: 2). In times where 'the'  
18 migrant from the Global South seems to embody all the fears and dangers in the Global North,  
19 which appears to justify an increasingly restrictive global policing of racialised populations  
20 and where the war on terror has increasingly turned also into a war on (precarious) migration,  
21 how does the migration discipline respond to the sudden increase in interest by the makers of  
22 migration policy?  
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## 28 II. Becoming Legible to Migration Policymakers

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30 Even if the aphorism 'a rising tide lifts all boats' may contain some truth, the figuratively used  
31 notion of the 'migration wave' has disproportionately lifted a form of scholarship that purports  
32 to generate 'actionable' knowledge on migration for 'evidenced-based' policymaking.  
33 Engagement between researchers and policymakers is commonly portrayed as a win-win  
34 situation where policymakers profit from rigorously produced evidence while researchers  
35 profit not merely from the prestige of having their work considered relevant 'in the real world'  
36 but also more concretely from gaining access to the realms of policymaking and government,  
37 greater funding opportunities, and thus growing research output and readership. Still, this  
38 supposed win-win situation has recently undergone some scrutiny, with concerns being raised  
39 about the growing intimacy of the worlds of policy and research around the contested issue of  
40 migration.  
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44 Martin Baldwin-Edwards, Brad Blitz, and Heaven Crawley (2018: 10) have observed that in  
45 light of migration becoming "deeply politicised at the national and regional levels",  
46 policymakers would pick research findings *à la carte*, thus only those findings suiting dominant  
47 political interests. They hold that the evidence produced in research tends to lose its complexity  
48 when incorporated into the policy process due to such "politics of policymaking." While there  
49 is no doubt that complexity tends to be lost when research is incorporated in policy processes,  
50 which is certainly neither unique for migration scholarship nor a recent phenomenon, I would  
51 like to explore what I see as the other side of the problem. Namely, the ways in which the desire  
52 for policy-relevance has come to factor into processes of knowledge production on migration.  
53 In other words, instead of policymakers simply reducing the complexity of research when  
54 drawing from its findings, it feels significant to explore whether migration research is at risk  
55 of adapting to what is considered digestible and useable for policymakers. To put it succinctly,  
56 this article wonders about the impact of policy on migration research.  
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3 It is important to acknowledge the increasing pressure on scholars, many of whom are  
4 employed precariously, to “[demonstrate] the relevance and significance of their research, with  
5 the quality of work measured in terms of the extent to which it has an ‘impact’ on policy”  
6 (Baldwin-Edwards, Blitz, and Crawley 2018: 2). Making the case for policy relevance seems  
7 inescapable in the current research environment in the UK (but also elsewhere) where the  
8 impact agenda has led to “the expansion of the production of policy-relevant knowledge into  
9 spaces that were previously domains of academic knowledge production” (Bandola-Gill 2019:  
10 902). Completely omitting the policy dimension would mean to significantly hamper the  
11 chances of grant success, and therefore, ultimately, reduce one’s ‘employability’. Feeling such  
12 pressure, I have also pointed to the relevance of my proposed research ‘for policy’ when  
13 drawing up my Leverhulme grant proposal in 2017. Though largely a box-ticking exercise, I  
14 noted: “my research promises to be of high significance for scholars working in the field of  
15 migration, for practitioners engaging in the Mediterranean, as well as for EU policy makers.”  
16 Still, while this pressure on scholars is real and not negligible, what is their responsibility for  
17 produced knowledges on migration? How is research impacted when it is meant to be legible  
18 to policymakers?  
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23 Policy’s impact on research can be discerned when policy categories, assumptions, and needs  
24 constitute the bases and (conceptual) frames of research. This tendency has been observed  
25 already in the terrorism discipline where framing research with policy-relevance as its end-  
26 point “pushes us towards asking particular kinds of questions and looking for particular kinds  
27 of evidence” (Jackson 2016: 123). In the migration discipline, Richard Black (2001: 63)  
28 observed already about twenty years ago that the “relatively uncritical use of a policy-based  
29 definition of refugees within academic writing has a long pedigree”, while, for Anna Lindley  
30 (2014: 8), the privileging of “policy categories [...] as a starting point for research” continues  
31 to be a main “weakness of migration studies.” In his widely cited article, Oliver Bakewell  
32 (2008: 434-435) argues “that studies arising too closely from policy concerns can tend to skew  
33 the basis for research, constraining the questions asked, the areas of study, the methods used  
34 and the analysis.” Importantly, Bakewell notes, “the search for policy relevance has encouraged  
35 researchers to take the categories, concepts and priorities of policy makers and practitioners as  
36 their initial frame of reference for identifying their areas of study and formulating research  
37 questions.”  
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41 That policy categories and definitions, policy assumptions, and policy needs have come to  
42 underwrite much of the research conducted on migration appears clear today, about five years  
43 after the peak of the European ‘migration crisis’. This impact of policy on research seems  
44 particularly apparent when we enquire into, first, the unproblematized use and (re-)production  
45 of migrant and refugee figures in research; second, the reinforcing of a state-centric gaze on  
46 migration; and, third, the creation of statistical migration spectacles. While certainly not  
47 exhaustive or new, these three interrelated aspects feel emblematic of the ways in which a  
48 policy gaze, directly or indirectly, wilfully or unconsciously, has cemented in the migration  
49 discipline and thereby reinforced certain ‘truths’ about migration. I will briefly outline each of  
50 these three aspects in turn.  
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### ***(Re-)producing Migrant and Refugee Figures***

54 The legalistic differentiation between ‘migrants’ and ‘refugees’ constitutes one of the most  
55 glaring examples of the problematic acceptance of policy categories and definitions in research.  
56 Even if Bakewell (2008: 437, 450) rightly warns against an “over-reliance on policy  
57 categories” and makes the case for “policy irrelevant research”, he insists on maintaining the  
58 “essential difference between refugees and other migrants.” Along such seemingly essential  
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3 difference, two sub-fields of study have evolved and prospered that focus on ‘their’ respective  
4 subjects: migrants who move ‘voluntarily’, and refugees or forced migrants who move  
5 ‘involuntarily’ (Stierl 2020b). Such specialisation into distinct fields of scholarship - Migration  
6 Studies on the one hand and Refugee or Forced Migration Studies on the other - has further  
7 cemented dominant policy labels and the production of figures to whom reductive motifs for  
8 movement and displacement are assigned (Zetter 2007; Scheel and Squire 2004).

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11 Routinely, these policy categories are assumed to “simply exist, out there, as empty vessels  
12 into which people can be placed in some neutral ordering process” (Crawley and Skleparis  
13 2018: 49). The division between migrants and refugees, and consequently between the fields  
14 of their study, feels emblematic of what R.B.J. Walker (2010: 257–258) has warned against:  
15 “analytical procedures that presume a radical dualism as a ground of scholarly credibility.”  
16 Although offering little to grasp either the complex lived realities of moving and displaced  
17 people or the ways in which “regimes of ‘migration management’” and accelerating “processes  
18 of illegalization” (Mezzadra 2015: 121) have blurred boundaries between those characterised  
19 as migrants or refugees, the a priori adoption of such radically dualist policy categories in  
20 research appears to signal credibility to migration policymakers. As Nicholas De Genova,  
21 Martina Tazzioli, and Glenda Garelli (2018: 257) note,

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25 migration studies, as a professional intellectual field, tends to reify and fetishize epistemic  
26 objects such as ‘migration’ and ‘migrants’ just as refugee studies similarly cultivates the  
27 specialization of an often rarefied and rather technical object of knowledge that is labeled  
28 ‘refugee’.

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31 For B.S. Chimni (2009: 12), scholars of migration have largely failed to “address the definition  
32 issue” and have participated in the “legal fetishism” underwriting the “non-entrée policies” of  
33 countries in the Global North. They, Chimni argues, have ignored the fact that “life and  
34 epistemology do not imitate legal categories” so that “legal categories most often seek to  
35 ‘discipline’ life and knowledge to realize dominant interests in society.” A scholarship that  
36 reifies untenable migrant/refugee divisions risks being implicated in the normalisation of  
37 seemingly objective, value-neutral, and technocratic labels, and thus risks becoming complicit  
38 in the disciplining of migration.

### 39 40 41 ***Reinforcing a State-centric Gaze***

42 Migration scholarship that seeks to signal its relevance to policymakers tends to perpetuate the  
43 assumed naturalness of the nation-state form and its boundaries, which is, after all, the frame  
44 in which policymakers predominantly operate. If “thinking about immigration means thinking  
45 about the state” (Abdelmalek Sayad 2018: 166), there is a tendency in the policy-relevant  
46 migration discipline to see and think *like* the state (Scott 1999). The lack of scholarly propensity  
47 to problematise what Andreas Wimmer and Nina Glick-Schiller (2002: 302) famously called  
48 “methodological nationalism”, namely “the assumption that the nation/state/society is the  
49 natural social and political form of the modern world”, is starkly evident in migration  
50 scholarship.

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54 Certainly, methodological nationalism is detectable throughout the social sciences and not  
55 singularly an effect of the desire for policy-relevance. And yet, migration scholarship’s  
56 inability to break out of such “sedentarist thinking” (Lindley 2014: 1) is, or should be, of  
57 fundamental concern for a discipline that studies cross-border issues and migratory  
58 subjectivities. When viewed through a state-centric gaze, ‘the’ migrant necessarily remains “a  
59 distinct category of human mobility (or, mobile humanity)” (De Genova 2013: 253), an

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3 anomaly to be governed and disciplined, “an aberration of the prior norm” (Soguk 1999: 14).  
4 Instead of investigating the ways in which “the refugee is always a reproach to the formation  
5 of the political order or subjectivity which necessarily gives rise to the refugee” (Dillon 1998:  
6 30), policy-relevant migration scholarship risks turning the figure of the refugee from a  
7 “scandal for politics” into a political scandal and problem that needs to be ‘solved’ by the state.  
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10 Even when migration policymaking takes place in a ‘global’ frame, the naturalness of the  
11 sovereign order continues to be taken for granted. As Nyers (2019: 176) shows when  
12 commenting on the global compacts on migration and refugees, what underpins these UN  
13 agreements is the assumption “that the principle of state sovereignty is unquestioningly the  
14 organizing principle of international and domestic politics.” This continuous reification of the  
15 naturalness of the state has also not been inhibited through processes of regionalisation (and  
16 globalisation) in and of EUrope which would, somewhat intuitively, seem to disturb nationalist  
17 imaginaries inscribed in methodological nationalism. What has emerged instead is a form of  
18 methodological ‘EUropeanism’ that positions the migrant, arguably more explicitly in the post-  
19 2015 era than before, as an anomaly and disturbance not merely of social cohesion within EU  
20 member states or of the relations between them, but of the ‘EUropean project’ as such. In order  
21 to appeal to policymakers, much of migration scholarship has not problematised but reinforced  
22 “the superimposition of Euro-centred categories and narratives onto any landscape of mobility”  
23 (Garelli and Tazzioli, 2013b: 247). Processes of EUropeanisation have thus not broken  
24 naturalised state frames in migration research. Rather, we see their reproduction on a larger  
25 canvass, something that one could refer to as “methodological continentalism” (Hansen and  
26 Jonsson 2017: 18).  
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### 30 *Creating Statistical Spectacles*

31 In order to be legible to policymakers, migration scholarship is at risk of partaking in the  
32 creation of statistical migration spectacles. With numbers becoming themselves “key actors in  
33 debates and policy about migration”, as Amade M’charek and Julia Black (2020: 87) note, we  
34 have recently seen the explosion of migration statistics. These statistics are believed to  
35 objectively represent shifting migrant flows, routes, and deaths. However, as Charles Heller  
36 and Antoine Pécoud (2019: 4, emphasis in original) show by drawing from the writing of  
37 Michel Foucault on statistics as “*knowledge of the state*”, migration statistics are far from  
38 neutral representations of ‘truths’:  
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42 Migration statistics do not merely ‘describe’, in an ‘objective’ manner, a pre-existing social  
43 reality. They rather contribute to the very existence of ‘migration’ by making the  
44 phenomenon visible and countable by governments. They are both the product of  
45 immigration policies and the condition for these polices to exist, thereby constituting the  
46 privileged tool through which state policies operate.  
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49 Statistics play a pivotal role in the realm of migration as EUropean governments and  
50 institutions heavily draw on them when devising strategies to combat migrant movements.  
51 Rather than critically investigating “*how, why, by and for whom, and to what ends* these acts  
52 of (official) counting are performed”, scholarship that seeks policy-relevance feeds implicitly  
53 or explicitly into what we have described as the production of a *spectacle of statistics*, a  
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56 numbers game [that is] exploited by national governments, EU institutions, and international  
57 organizations, as well as fear-mongering news media and right-wing populist political  
58 parties, [which] routinely serve to fortify the more general staging of a spectacle of  
59 ‘invasion’ or ‘inundation’ conjured by images of seemingly desperate ‘foreign’  
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(orientalized) masses seeking entry to places where they ostensibly do not belong, have no legitimate claim, and are presumably unwelcome. (New Keywords, 2016: 22-24, emphases in original)

The production of statistical knowledge in migration scholarship has coalesced with the production of a wide range of visual representations, such as maps, charts, and graphs that seem to objectively portray migratory dynamics and trajectories. These impositions of truth on space tend to reinforce conceptions of migration as seemingly always-already EUrope-bound (Newhouse 2018) and as active intrusions into passive EUropean sovereign territory where migration policy and border control measures appear to constitute *re*-actions to migrant transgressions. For Maribel Casas-Cortes and Sebastian Cobarrubias (2018: 30), cartographic representations “deploy the [...] neutrality associated with expertise” but “can have concrete human consequences beyond the maps, giving rise to controversial practices of interception far away from conventional borderlines.” What migration statistics and maps rarely represent or account for are the “subjective experiences of borders” (Rigo 2018: 509), the many attempts undertaken to cross particular borders, the passage of time between different legs of the journeys, the manifold re-orientations, the separations between loved ones, the experiences of blatant or more insidious forms of border violence (Khosravi 2007).

### III. Harmful Migration Policies

When “policy friendliness [becomes] a metric for the selection of research methodologies” (Bakewell 2008: 441), we see how a scholarly field risks reinforcing policy categorisations of people, reproducing a state-centric gaze on migration, and partaking in the creation of statistical spectacles. Although these pitfalls resulting from the desire to become legible to policymakers are not particularly novel in the migration discipline, they have amplified through the unprecedented post-2015 migration knowledge/policy hype. Given the significant increase in funding opportunities in EUrope for policy-relevant migration research, one can observe that scholars of migration (including, or particularly, those who have recently jumped onto the migration bandwagon) are not merely passively “co-opted by political or bureaucratic interests” (Black 2001: 67) but have actively sought to become ‘co-opted’. What cannot be evaluated in this article is the ‘real’ impact of current migration research on EUropean migration policy but what can be alluded to is the impact of EUropean policies on migrant lives. Over the past five years, EUropean migration policies have turned increasingly restrictive, exacerbating the injurious and deadly violence that we have witnessed already for decades along EUrope’s external borders (Steinhilper and Gruijters 2018). Three policy responses to the ‘migration crisis’ seem emblematic: EUropean deals and agreements with Turkey, as well as with political factions within Libya and the Sahel region.

EU-Turkey policies: Following the EU-Turkey deal of March 2016, illegal push-back operations from Greece to Turkey via sea and land borders have become systematic, preventing thousands from applying for asylum in EUrope by unlawfully forcing them back to where they had escaped from. Moreover, the Turkish coastguards, incentivised by six billion Euro financial support to Turkey (European Commission 2018c), have conducted mass interceptions of migrant boats in the Aegean Sea. At the same time, the hotspots installed on the Greek islands as part of the EU’s ‘Approach to Migration’ have turned into overcrowded detention camps where tens of thousands languish in inhumane conditions and where children self-harm and attempt suicide at an alarming rate (MSF 2019).

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3 EU-Libya policies: Agreements between Europe and the UN-backed Libyan Government of  
4 National Accord have prompted the interception of tens of thousands of migrants seeking to  
5 escape via the sea and their return to detention facilities characterised by German diplomats as  
6 ‘concentration-camp’ like (Guardian 2017). In 2017 and 2018, 91.3 million Euro were  
7 mobilised from the EU’s ‘Emergency Trust Fund for Africa’ to support ‘Integrated Border and  
8 Migration Management’, meaning the building up, equipping, and training of the so-called  
9 Libyan coastguards who have engaged in systematic forms of human rights abuse, including  
10 the killing of returned migrants (European Commission 2018d). At the same time, European  
11 actors such as Frontex, Eunavfor Med, as well as national coastguards have largely abandoned  
12 Search and Rescue operations while NGOs have been impeded from carrying out rescue  
13 operations.  
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17 EU-Sahel policies: The Sahel region has also experienced the violent effects of EU border  
18 externalisation policies. By finding “‘partners’ of their migration policies both in Libya’s south,  
19 controlled by various ethnic militias, and beyond Libya’s borders in the three Sahelo-Saharan  
20 states south of Libya”, Jérôme Tubiana, Clotilde Warin, and Gaffar Saeneen (2018: 9, 72-73)  
21 note, Europe has “aggravated existing ‘militia-isation’ policies – the empowerment of militias  
22 who can be simultaneously involved in smuggling and anti-smuggling, and whose presence is  
23 itself a security threat.” This outsourcing of border enforcement not only to authoritarian  
24 regimes but also sub-state militias is not a novel development but has been reinforced over  
25 recent years, resulting in increasingly dangerous transit routes and a dramatically rising death  
26 toll in the Sahara, by some estimated to be higher than in the Mediterranean (UNHCR 2020).  
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30 The adverse effects of EU policies on migrant lives have been extensively documented but,  
31 remarkably, the ethical conundrum arising from engaging with the makers of some of these  
32 policies has not been sufficiently addressed. Given the fact that death and despair result directly  
33 from restrictive EU migration policies, ought the migration discipline not ask itself some hard  
34 questions akin to the questions raised by critical terrorism scholars outlined before? Shouldn’t  
35 the ‘do no harm’ principle so prevalent in migration research encompass also the potentially  
36 harmful consequences resulting from research made relevant to migration policymakers?  
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39 The ‘do no harm’ principle addresses the potential for harm caused to often-vulnerable research  
40 participants and has generated greater sensibility around issues of consent, access,  
41 confidentiality, asymmetrical relationships, privacy, and so forth. For some, it has become  
42 “scholarly consensus” in the migration discipline, even “a golden rule and a framework for  
43 analysis” (Krause 2017: 5). Others, however, have been more sceptical, noting the absence of  
44 clear guidelines on how to practically navigate ethical complexities and challenges in migration  
45 research (Jacobsen and Landau 2003) as well as the persistence of “unethical and potentially  
46 exploitative” research practices (Mackenzie, McDowell, and Pittaway 2007: 300). How,  
47 precisely, one could extend the ‘do no harm’ principle to engagements with policymakers  
48 cannot be fleshed out in this article but raising such proposition intends to prompt debate within  
49 the migration discipline where the recent knowledge/policy hype and the boom in funding  
50 opportunities for policy-relevant research have largely been viewed positively.  
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54 Considering the ‘do no harm’ principle for encounters with policymakers serves, first and  
55 foremost, as a reminder of the *politicality* of knowledge production. Such reminder is needed  
56 in view of research projects such as ‘Intelligent Portable Control System’ (2016a), short  
57 ‘iBorderCtrl’, generously funded by *Horizon2020*. Despite connecting several universities with  
58 tech companies as well as police and border authorities, and aiming “to enable faster and  
59 thorough border control for third country nationals crossing the land borders of EU Member  
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3 States”, this project present itself in a wide-eyed manner as “only a research project,  
4 researching and developing new technologies”, the use of which “at the border in the future is  
5 unclear” (Intelligent Portable Control System 2016b). Posing questions about the potential  
6 harmful effects of projects such as iBorderCtrl situates research outcomes inescapably in the  
7 “political process which has, over recent years, stigmatised, vilified and undermined the rights  
8 of refugees and migrants in Europe” (Crawley and Skleparis 2018: 50), and has, moreover, led  
9 to the deaths of thousands along external EU borders.  
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12 Migration research, even if not engaging in projects as dubious as iBorderCtrl, has to consider  
13 its implication in the border or illegality industry (Andersson 2014). That the current migration  
14 hype is also a knowledge/policy hype means that scholars are, as De Genova (2013: 252)  
15 writes, “‘of the connections’ between migrants’ transnational mobilities and the political, legal,  
16 and border policing regimes that seek to orchestrate, regiment, and manage their energies.” In  
17 the absence of “neutral ground”, migration researchers “are ‘of’ these connections because  
18 there is no ‘outside’ or analytical position beyond them.” In view of such implication, posing  
19 the question about potential harm constitutes a first step toward acknowledging responsibility  
20 for produced knowledges beyond a narrow conception of the ‘do no harm’ principle, possibly  
21 making it harder to portray the knowledge/policy nexus as simply pragmatic, objective, and  
22 unpolitical. It could, moreover, open up room for alternative ideas around ‘impact’. If, in times  
23 of the impact agenda, the famous ‘so what’ question has come to mean relevance of scholarship  
24 besides contributions to academic knowledge, what other forms of impact are there beyond, or  
25 even antagonistic to, the realm of policy?  
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#### 31 **IV. Impactful Migration Research**

32 Research impact, according to the ESRC (2020), can be defined as “the demonstrable  
33 contribution that excellent research makes to society and the economy.” Though it is not  
34 immediately apparent what sort of contribution is envisaged, it seems clear that the current  
35 ‘impact agenda’ in the social sciences is dominated by often “surprisingly simple and linear  
36 ideas about how research can be ‘utilised’ to produce more effective policies” (Boswell and  
37 Smith 2017: 2). Frequently, in the migration discipline, “policy relevance can be read as a  
38 proxy for practical relevance” (Bakewell 2008: 434) so that the transfer of one’s research to  
39 the policy realm is equated with its impact in the ‘real’ world. The purported practical relevance  
40 of research can thus be claimed when EU or national policymakers attend meetings and  
41 acknowledge one’s research findings. As a consequence, migration researchers are at a similar  
42 risk as terrorism researchers to engage in a “‘slightly incestuous echotalk’ [...] where  
43 policymakers and researchers are mutually reinforcing each others’ claims as authoritative”  
44 (Jackson, Breen Smyth, and Gunning 2009: 25).  
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49 In some sense, regarding policy relevance *as* practical relevance is legitimate as research  
50 findings transferred to policymakers can have direct, and thus political, implications –  
51 something which often remains under-acknowledged, as argued before. Still, the predominant  
52 conception of policy relevance *as* impact silences the many other, and arguably less harmful  
53 and more valuable, ways of contributing through knowledge production. Three of these other  
54 ways of impact are briefly sketched-out in turn. These examples, which signify what I call  
55 ‘epistemic interventions’, ‘counter-empirics’, and ‘activist engagement’ were chosen not as  
56 ideal types or blueprints for impactful research but simply because they relate to my own  
57 scholarly-activist practices.  
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### ***Epistemic interventions***

Given the impact of policy on research and the adaption of scholarship to the needs of policymakers, state-centric gazes on and policy categories of migration have become perpetuated. Despite this perpetuation, often irresolvable contradictions and tensions remain in efforts to govern mobility, not least due to migration's complexity and dynamism. For example, attempts to neatly label people 'on the move' along pre-existing categories or to distinguish between flight help, smuggling, and trafficking often fail, highlighting an "epistemic crisis [...], the crisis of nomenclatures and taxonomies" (Mezzadra 2015: 125). This epistemic crisis likewise underwrites policy-relevant migration research and generates ruptures and frictions where more critical research can intervene. Intervening epistemically by following material struggles of migration has been one of the main aims of the 'New Keywords Collective'. Under this collective name, critical scholars have sought to 'hijack' dominant migration terminologies and concepts, including 'migration crisis', 'European values', or 'alien/foreigner'. In our latest writing project (New Keywords forthcoming), we note: "our task here is to de-sediment these apparently banal and routine fixtures of the dominant political language in order to subject them to critical reflection, to de-naturalize their apparent transparency, and re-politicize the de-politicization that ensues from their mundanity." Rather than ignoring the crisis of knowledge and knowledge categories, epistemic interventions in the migration discipline can challenge taken-for-granted ideas, definitions, and 'truths' – not necessarily to establish other finite and fixed ones, but precisely to draw out "the heterogenous struggles and contestations that constantly unsettle and redefine their meanings."

In my own work, I have followed Sandro Mezzadra's (in Garelli and Tazzioli, 2013c: 310) call "to locate and consolidate the possibility of ruptures" by considering migration struggles as analytics that allow to scrutinise the exclusionary, violent, and division-making practices and policies that underpin the EUropean border regime (Stierl 2019). Following such material struggles enabled me to interrogate the epistemic crises of the border regime and the many ways in which state sovereignty is "profoundly unsettled by all sorts of social and political movements" (Nyers 2019: 176). For example, the struggles I traced exposed a central dilemma at the heart of the border regime: The ever-more drastic ways in which EUropean migration policies curtailed possibilities for legal migration were productive of what they were ostensibly designed to curtail, unauthorised movements. These unauthorised movements could not be contained, revealing crises over EUropean state sovereignty, particularly in 2015 and 2016, when they effectively dismantled, though only temporarily, one of the world's most militarised regimes of population control. In light of such historic and hitherto unimaginable rupture, the ungovernability of collective migratory movements brought into crisis (rather than constituting a crisis itself) what we knew, or thought we knew, about the governability and 'management' of migration.

### ***Counter-Empirics***

In contrast to mainstream migration studies' perpetuation of statistical migration spectacles and the mapping of migration routes and dynamics through a state gaze, a type of scholarship has emerged that explicitly aims to produce 'counter-empirics' in order to expose EUrope's violent migration policies. As Lorenzo Pezzani and Charles Heller (2013: 294, emphasis in original) note, such scholarship is underpinned by a

*'disobedient gaze, which aims not to disclose what the regime of migration management attempts to unveil – clandestine migration: but unveil that which it attempts to hide – the political violence it is founded on and the human rights violations that are its structural outcome.'*

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Research-activist networks such as WatchTheMed or Forensic Oceanography have used such disobedient gaze to localise pressure points in the European border regime and have produced a range of counter-empirics in the form of reports, maps, and documentaries to both reveal and denounce the drastic violation of migrant rights in the Mediterranean region. Forensic Oceanography has turned EU surveillance ‘against itself’ (Heller, Pezzani and Stierl 2017) so as to counter-monitor border enforcers and to exert democratic control “on the controllers of borders” (Balibar 2002, 85). As Pezzani and Heller (2019: 57-58) note:

By combining testimonies of human rights violations with digital technologies such as satellite imagery, vessel tracking data, geospatial mapping, and drift modelling, Forensic Oceanography has exercised a critical right to look at sea [...]. [U]sing surveillance means ‘against the grain’, it has produced spatial analysis that has been used within existing legal and political forums, supporting the quest for justice of migrants and their families in legal proceedings, parliamentary auditions, human rights, and journalistic investigations.

Through the production of counter-empirics, notorious ‘left-to-die’ practices in the Mediterranean, the intentional production of a rescue vacuum after the end of the Italian humanitarian-military operation Mare Nostrum, the criminalisation and de-legitimisation of rescue NGOs, and the deployment of Libyan militias or private actors in ‘push-back by proxy’ operations could be uncovered.

### *Activist engagement*

Acknowledging that as a researcher on migration and borders I am “part of the field of struggle and a participant therein” (De Genova 2013: 252), I have opted to engage in activism that seeks to directly counter and ideally prevent the devastation produced by Europe’s violent border enforcements. Although my activist engagement preceded my research, it has intensified over the past six years during which I have participated in the Alarm Phone (2020) project which runs a hotline that supports people in distress in the Mediterranean Sea. Since October 2014, our activist network composed of over 200 members situated in Europe and Africa has assisted over 3,300 migrant boats seeking to escape from Turkey, Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Egypt, or Libya. Besides offering such direct support in real-time, often in collaboration with NGO rescuers, the Alarm Phone has turned into a crucial witness at sea and uncovered manifold human rights violations, ranging from acts of abandonment and refolement practices to violent assaults of people in distress at sea. The activist project has also inspired others, such as Alarme Phone Sahara (2020), which seeks to counteract the effects of Europe’s externalised borders in the Sahel region.

Activist engagement in European and African borderzones has produced insights that mainstream migration research, and certainly policy-relevant research, could never have produced. With regards to the two Alarm Phones, the knowledge emanating from activist engagement, often co-produced with people considered migrants and their families and friends, has shed light on the effects of European migration policies in largely inaccessible spaces. Without this (and other) activist engagement, much of the actual bordering processes in the Mediterranean and the Sahara would remain unknown. In numerous instances, EU authorities and international organisations were forced to respond to revelations of human rights violations which demonstrates the impact activist interventions can have. Nevertheless, and despite such impact in the ‘real’ world, activist engagement as a way to produce critical knowledges on migration is widely frowned upon in the migration discipline, consistently accused of failing

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3 to constitute ‘real’ research, whereas policy-relevant research rarely faces such accusation, not  
4 least due to its claim to objectivity and value-neutrality.  
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### 6 7 **Conclusion**

8 Inspired by Marx’s eleventh thesis on Feuerbach, Giorgio Grappi (2013: 323) writes:  
9 “migration researchers have only interpreted the migration regime, in various ways; the point  
10 is to change it.” Compelled to engage “at the level of the materiality of migration as a social  
11 fact”, the “militant” researcher is implicated in migration conceived “as a social relation  
12 mediated by special ‘things’ such as documents, papers and different statuses”. In view of this  
13 article’s discussion, one could wonder whether migration scholarship has indeed ‘only  
14 interpreted the migration regime’ or whether, in fact, some strands of this scholarship have  
15 helped consolidate it. Thus, rather than advocating for a move from ‘interpretation’ to ‘practical  
16 change’, the question seems to instead be: ‘what change’, what sort of ‘impact’ can migration  
17 scholarship initiate or produce?  
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21 This article has enquired into the current knowledge/policy hype around migration and the high  
22 demand for research that appears to produce actionable ‘evidence’ for policymakers. The  
23 impact of policy on research can have several adverse effects, including the (re-)production of  
24 migrant and refugee figures, the reinforcing of state-centric gazes on migration, and the  
25 creation of statistical migration spectacles. The desire to become legible to policymakers often  
26 entails “conforming to the way that policymakers view reality” (Jackson 2016: 123) and thus  
27 means remaining confined in policy frames and categories which curtails a priori what  
28 questions are asked and what issues are explored. The “ruling order of policy”, Jacques  
29 Rancière (1992: 62) notes, is concerned “about ‘right’ names, names that pin people down to  
30 their place and work.” Reproducing these policy categories and identities through research, and  
31 in the name of policy relevance, thus risks complicity in the disciplining of migration through  
32 restrictive policies that intend to, quite literally, pin people down to particular places.  
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36 Seeking impact on European migration policy often means seeking to partake in a political  
37 process that is driven by the overwhelming desire to govern, contain, and deter human  
38 movements from the Global South. The implementation of European migration policies has  
39 caused widespread harm, not merely in the Saharan desert or the Mediterranean Sea but also  
40 within, throughout, and far beyond of what is considered Europe’s nominal space. Though  
41 often portrayed as such, scholarly knowledge production is not outside of these harmful  
42 processes. The pressure on knowledge workers to produce output of relevance for policy does  
43 not erase the responsibility of scholars to consider the implications of produced findings. There  
44 is a need to acknowledge that researching migration is never a neutral, objective, or unpolitical  
45 undertaking. Only once this is accepted, and once harm resulting from research is considered  
46 a real possibility, can the migration discipline really consider the ethics of impact, and the ‘do  
47 no harm’ principle its ‘golden rule’. The introspections within Critical Terrorism Studies can  
48 prove a useful guide, not least given the progressive securitisation of migration and the  
49 targeting of particularly racialised individuals and groups through both counter-terrorism and  
50 counter-migration policies.  
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54 In view of the atrocities that result from what Étienne Balibar (2004) calls ‘global apartheid’,  
55 of which the European border regime is part and parcel, the migration discipline needs to  
56 enquire into both the blatant and more insidious forms of violence that European migration  
57 policies produce and critically assess the role of scholarship in the border industry. This article  
58 has pointed to some scholarly-activist practices that go further, toward an ethos of avoiding  
59 and averting harm, underwritten by a commitment to critique and challenge structures of power  
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and segregation. Of course, given the “constant drainage of critical knowledge towards a policy-oriented approach” (Grappi, 2013: 321) in the contested field of migration, it is not always possible to predict what scholarly knowledges may “be reabsorbed by the ‘deportation regime’” (Garelli and Tazzioli, 2013a: 303). This at times unpredictable risk does not absolve the researcher but, to the contrary, compels more critical and reflexive awareness about one’s political implication in the border industry and the need to locate possibilities to counteract tendencies in migration scholarship that facilitate such drainage of knowledge or that even outrightly advocate for its co-optation. Maybe the ‘do no harm’ principle needs to not merely be expanded to include engagements with the makers of migration policies, it may need to be reversed. *Do harm* could be the motto for a critical and impactful scholarship of migration that locates, and expands, ruptures in the European border regime.

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50 <sup>ii</sup> This article speaks of 'EUrope' throughout. In this way it seeks to problematise frequently employed usages that  
51 equate the EU with Europe and Europe with the EU and suggests, at the same time, that EUrope is not reducible  
52 to the institutions of the EU.  
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