



SPECIAL SECTION

The Role of “Voluntariness” in the Governance of Migration

Guest Editors

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Editorial Introduction

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■ **ABSTRACT:** This article introduces the theme and scope of this Special Themed Section on the role of ‘voluntariness’ in the governance of migration. It provides an overarching framework for defining and operationalising the notion of voluntariness in the field of migration studies; and for investigating how voluntariness works across different sites, situations and in distinct national contexts. We understand voluntariness as a general principle and instrument that (re)produces the active participation of different actors across society in the (state-driven) management of migration. This focus leads us to explore key dimensions in the shifting (neo-liberal) governmentality of migration in contemporary societies. The introduction makes the case for bringing together seemingly disparate examples and case studies in order to shed new light on how certain ascribed meanings and understandings of voluntariness can shape the actions of very different subjects involved in contemporary bordering processes.

■ **KEYWORDS:** asylum, deportation, governance, governmentality, humanitarianism, migration, neoliberalism, refugees, voluntary

The labeling of migration as either “forced” or “voluntary” has long been identified as a key dimension of how national governments respond to human mobility and, especially, how they “manage the undesirables” (Agier 2011; see also Zetter 2007 and Faist 2018). This distinction is often made in response to the migration of people whose right to migrate is being questioned (as in the case of those portrayed as “bogus refugees”), in a context in which borders are being strengthened, diversified, and diffused across society (Mezzadra and Neilson 2013). The way in which different actors examine and accept (or contest) the purported “voluntary” character of unwanted migration has also recently gained attention in migration studies (Crawley and Skleparis 2018). In particular, this literature highlights how the notion of “voluntary migration” works as an arbitrary and discriminatory principle that helps to produce and justify violent processes of exclusion of “undesired” and “undeserving” migrants, and is often linked to discourses



and policies based on emotions of compassion and a “humanitarian reason” (Fassin 2012; Siriyeh 2018; Ticktin 2016).

In this Special Section, we suggest that “voluntariness” is of interest not just as a governmental label attached to certain instances of cross-border mobility, but also as a more general principle and instrument of governance that is crucial for neoliberal and humanitarian modes of “migration management” (Geiger and Pecoud 2010). From this perspective, we propose that “voluntariness” should be seen as an analytical category in itself. This focus leads us to address instances of how voluntariness is leveraged on and by different actors involved in the making, implementation, negotiation, and contestation of contemporary migration policies and bordering processes. By starting to explore some of these instances, we aim to contribute to critical migration and border studies. As we develop further throughout this introduction, the different contributions in this Special Section show how voluntariness works to involve unlikely subjects into restrictive policies and practices of migration management, hide the violence of contemporary border regimes, and articulate liberal democratic governing frameworks.

Apart from tracing how “voluntariness” works in specific contexts, we want to highlight the multiple and far-reaching consequences that it has as a technology of (migration) governance. As such, it can change the quality of relations between actors of the migration regime, aid the implementation of policies, and shift peoples’ perceptions and expectations of contemporary bordering processes. In addition, it can both open and close different forms of political potential for contesting, subverting, and disrupting these processes. By bringing together seemingly disparate examples and case studies, we detail and critically discuss how certain ascribed meanings and understandings of voluntariness can shape the actions of very different—and often unlikely—subjects involved in contemporary migration governance. In so doing, we also respond to calls to decenter migration studies, through the analysis of the interrelated values and everyday practices of the many different agents involved in migration management across society, and in particular those who are not directly involved in policy-making (El Qadim et al. 2021). We maintain that this focus is necessary in the context of the diffusion of border controls and the delegation of migration management tasks to nonstate actors (El-Enany 2020; Guiraudon and Lahav 2000; Rumford 2006; Walters 2002).

Voluntariness and Humanitarianism

The involvement and participation of nonstate actors in bordering practices has been a key question in the critical literature on humanitarianism, along with volunteering and charity action. As shown by Fassin (2012), the construction, in the last several decades, of a form of governance based on “humanitarian reason” has linked together principles and practices of “care” and “control” (see also Agier 2011; Feldman 2012; Ticktin 2016). Nongovernmental organizations and charities working in support of forced migrants are actively involved in the enforcement of border controls by constructing and reifying a “politics of life” (Fassin 2009) that establishes hierarchies and distinctions between different categories of newcomers. Often, these hierarchies and distinctions are based on judgments about the perceived “vulnerability” and “innocence” of the “victims” who need to be rescued by humanitarian actors and charity organizations (Ticktin 2016). As developed by Ticktin (*ibid.*: 257), the setting up of a clear “distinction between innocence and guilt” (when assessing who needs care and assistance) constitutes “the first problem with humanitarian borders”:

The quintessential humanitarian victims bear no responsibility for their suffering. Their innocence is what qualifies them for humanitarian compassion. As innocents, they are pure, without guile, and without intent—they are seemingly outside politics and certainly outside blame for their misfortune. Yet who are these perfect victims? (ibid.)

Notably, one of the basic functions of “voluntariness”—as a philosophical concept (Hyman 2013) but also, as the contributions in this Special Section will show, in everyday practice—is precisely to help assess a person’s innocence or guilt, and thereby, in this case, legitimize exclusionary humanitarian borders. Indeed, the last few decades have seen a decline of a logic of “rights” in favor of a humanitarian logic that closes the borders to those who are not seen as vulnerable, innocent, and in need of help. This has led scholars to evoke the “birth of the humanitarian border” (Walters 2011) and to highlight the significance of the “victim/savior” power relations in contemporary borderwork (Pallister-Wilkins 2015; Williams 2015). In this context, NGOs and charity organizations have played an increasingly important role in migration management processes. More generally, it has been shown how even actors who are primarily driven by values of care, compassion, and humanity often “voluntarily” engage in exclusionary practices and thus reproduce the mechanisms of “violent borders” (Jones 2016; see also Feldman and Ticktin 2012; Pallister-Wilkins 2020; Williams 2015).

Voluntariness and Neoliberalism

In addition to humanitarianism, another important rationality underlying contemporary migration policy is neoliberalism, as a form of governance that values and emphasizes individual autonomy, responsibility, and freedom (Turner 2014; Schinkel and Van Houdt 2010; Monforte et al. 2019). Accordingly, the power of the state is, and should be, limited to what is necessary, while “[a] sphere of freedom is to be (re-)established, where autonomous agents make their decisions, pursue their preferences and seek to maximise the quality of their [own] lives” (Rose and Miller 2010: 298). Individual subjects’ freedom to choose thus becomes not only a precondition for, but also a tool of, governance (Rose 1999; Foucault 2007; Dean 2010). Importantly, as Cleton and Chauvin (2020: 298–299) recently argued in relation to the politics of “voluntary return,” “this mode of government requires significant ideological work in order to ensure the interpretation of conduct as voluntary.” This continuous (re)production of voluntariness also works through concrete individual and institutional decisions and practices, which the contributions in this Section make visible. These practices are tangible manifestations of what Sara Kalm describes as “at least a rhetorical shift away from the emphasis on control” and toward a neoliberal “management” of migration (Kalm 2010: 21). By shifting responsibility for this management to various nonstate actors, governments can limit the influence of international and domestic laws that restrict their ability to prevent what they perceive as unwanted immigration (Sassen 1996). Not only private businesses, but also civil society organizations play a central role in the expansion of neoliberalism as the dominant form of governance (Jeffrey et al. 2018). In addition, this expansion has been exacerbated by the retrenchment of the welfare state following the 2008 financial crisis (Schiller and Hackett 2018; Mayblin and James 2019), requiring a transformation of state–civil society relations. For example, short-term project-based contracting has become one of the instruments through which governments exert control over service providers, including many charitable organizations (e.g., Evans et al. 2005; Monforte 2014). In this context, the governance of migration always requires at least some degree of acceptance, compliance, and cooperation from a wide range of nonstate actors, such as private businesses,

local governments, and civil society organizations, as well as migrants themselves (e.g., for their identity to be established, their status determined, or for their own “integration”) (Darling 2016; Humphris and Sigona 2019; Schweitzer 2022).

Voluntariness as a Technology of Governance

Migration scholarship on both humanitarianism and neoliberalism is often inspired by Foucauldian readings of power.¹ Welfare liberalism can be seen through Foucault’s writings on pastoral power, which trace “the historical development of the Christian pastorate and its gradual assimilation into modern state apparatuses” (Golder 2007: 159). Foucault traced several themes of pastoral power through his notion of the “Welfare State problem” (1990: 67). Liberal welfarism can be understood as a temporary coupling of liberal and pastoral rationalities—a coupling of governing through freedom and governing through need. The gradual unhinging of this coupling, which is consistent with the decline of the welfare state, also signals a reconfiguration of these rationalities. As a consequence, advanced liberalism imagines responsibility for governance shifting toward actors operating beyond the state, such as professionals, private corporations, and individual citizens; and a corresponding move toward these actors governing through their freedom (as we detail below, we do not posit this as a totalizing system, but a particular rationality in a specific context). There is a rise in “governing through freedom” and notions of choice within the post-welfare state (Clarke 2004; Dubois 2016; Muehlebach 2012). At the same time, “governing through need” or pastoral power has shifted from the state to various market and voluntary sector organizations (the “second” and “third” sectors). An important part of the reason for involving the third sector in particular is that these relations require, as Foucault emphasized, that power functions both negatively (cruelty, threat, fear, dread, torture, despair) and positively (desire, attraction, seduction, fulfillment, hope) (Isin and Ruppert 2020). Similarly, the literature on the emergence of humanitarian modes of migration management and border controls has often drawn from Foucault’s work on security, biopolitics, and governmentality (see Walters 2015 for a review). In particular, these perspectives show how—in line with the notion of biopolitics—the governance of migration is concerned with the “legitimacy attached to life” (Fassin 2009) and the distinction between the “biological life” and the “biographical life” of migrants and refugees (Brun 2016; Fassin 2012). This distinction raises questions about how nonstate actors—in the name of a politics of life—become involved in restrictive and violent border regimes, including states’ confinement and deportation policies (Agier 2006; Makaremi 2009; Walters 2011).

Drawing inspiration from these perspectives, we understand “voluntariness” to be a technology of governance that is leveraged in different ways through shifting rationalities of governance away from pastoral power, “governance through need,” to liberal power, “governance through freedom.” A corollary of this shift is people assuming individual responsibility for their own “choices.” Importantly, however, we see voluntariness as something more than mere freedom (to choose). It also means that an action is directed toward a more-or-less specific aim or objective (and reflects determination to reach that aim), and that the actor in question has all the necessary information regarding the different courses of action and concrete “choices” that might be available (e.g., Olsaretti 1998: 54). Understood in this way, voluntariness is a useful vantage point from which to explore the inconsistencies and irreconcilable tensions in contemporary migration governance. More specifically, it helps us to analyze how a wide range of actors become entangled in implementing restrictive migration and border policies, the frames

through which they understand and justify their actions, and the subjectivities that are created in and through everyday practices.

Voluntariness can thereby ensure a degree of compliance from the most unlikely actors to be brought into the migration regime. This is not to say, however, that voluntariness always works with or for the state, nor that it necessarily helps the implementation of restrictive migration policies. As Dean (2010: 21) noted, governing free actors means that “it is possible for them to act and to think in a variety of ways, and sometimes in ways not foreseen by authorities.” Also, as Yuval-Davis (2012: 93) has argued, neoliberal forms of governance are not exempt from political and economic crises, which can lead to a “growing disenchantment and alienation from the state on the part of citizens, who accordingly begin to refrain from internalising and complying with the neoliberal state’s technologies of governance.” As a matter of fact, acceptance or compliance is far from given. As some of the contributions in this Special Section show, voluntariness can produce specific openings for resistance and change. Actors involved in civil society organizations, for example, often refuse to accept official categorizations and continue to provide support to destitute refugees or undocumented migrants through mutual aid (see Humphris and Yarris and Monforte and Maestri in this section). This, in turn, can make it easier for those portrayed as “unwanted” migrants to resist what the state presents to them as their best option and only alternative to deportation: “voluntary return.” By at least temporarily suspending the exercise of state violence, assisted voluntary return schemes can even provide possibilities for absconding (Schweitzer, in this section).

Articulating Voluntariness: Actors and Practices of Migration Governance

This Special Section addresses the role of voluntariness in the governance of “unwanted” migration by focusing on three sets of actors, at different stages of the migration process: citizens who volunteer to support migrants in transit or upon arrival, migrants who consider a “voluntary” return to their countries of citizenship, and civil society organizations that often engage in both processes. These actors are not per se an integral part of the migration governance regime, but they often play a crucial role for policy implementation. While migrants themselves are legally bound by migration law and their noncompliance can trigger harsh sanctions, the compliance of the various “agents” of the state is seldom a matter of straightforward compulsion or obligation (Schweitzer 2020). Rather, it is one of steering and creating the conditions through which organizations—some of them marginalized and underresourced, others well established and active at the international level—are called upon to do the “dirty work” of border control (Anderson 2000; Humphris 2019). This, we argue, is a crucial dimension of how governments currently try to expand the effectiveness and reach of their efforts to manage migration.

Another way in which voluntariness works for migration governance is through “articulation.” Following Susan Leigh Star and Anselm Strauss’s (1999) notion of “articulation work,” Steven J. Jackson (2014: 223) argues that:

Articulation is about fit, or more precisely, the art of fitting, the myriad (often invisible) activities that enable and sustain even the most seemingly natural or automatic forms of order in the world. Articulation supports the smooth interaction of parts within complex sociotechnical wholes, adjusting and calibrating each to each. In building connections, it builds meaning and identity, sorting out ontologies on the fly rather than mixing and matching between fixed and stable entities. . . . When articulation fails, systems seize up, and our sociotechnical worlds become stiff, arthritic, unworkable.

Arguably, the notion of voluntariness articulates the governance of unwanted migration and assuages the crisis of governability that is provoked by the alleged “mass movement” of migrants from the Global South to the Global North. For Jackson (2014) articulation has much in common with “repair.” One of the things he highlights about the role of repair (of objects, technologies, etc.) is that it always and necessarily—though largely invisibly—extends, sustains, and completes innovation. It could also be argued, however, that repair prevents innovation, by fixing things or adapting them to changing requirements and purposes. As the contributions in this Special Section show, voluntariness—as a mode of articulation or repair—can make otherwise necessary and more fundamental reform of immigration governance systems, or innovation within them, (seem) less necessary. As well as making the system “work,” voluntariness thereby also successfully hides the harms of the current bordering system.

Contributions to the Special Section

The selected contributions to this Special Section analyze the role of voluntariness in the governance of migration from different disciplinary backgrounds and theoretical perspectives, focusing on diverse geographical contexts and institutional settings. All of them, however, deal with the following questions: what choices are offered to the actors who are voluntarily involved in migration governance? How do they understand, (re)negotiate, or contest these choices? And how do they justify their own actions? Overall, the purpose of this Special Section is to show not only the incoherence and tensions within border regimes and migration governance, but also how the idea of voluntariness is variously used to nonetheless make this system work. Whether by relieving pressure, avoiding conflict, overcoming resource constraints, smothering resistance, or providing legitimacy, it allows liberal states to maintain a moral and seemingly consistent standpoint while also enacting illiberal and coercive measures against migrants, including their destitution, detention, and deportation. However, we also argue that the focus on voluntariness allows for the limits of these strategies to be brought into the same analytical framework, and for exploration of how different actors can subvert or disrupt border regimes that they “voluntarily” become part of.

The first three contributions, by Tanya Aberman, Reinhard Schweitzer, and Zeynep Sahin Mencuttek, look at so-called “assisted voluntary return” (AVR) policies targeting migrants with no or precarious legal status (in Canada, the UK, Austria, and Turkey). While (Western) governments commonly present these programs as a more humane and less expensive alternative to enforced removal, in practice the two kinds of policy work hand in hand and leave very little room for migrants’ own decision-making. All three articles understand in/voluntariness of return as a matter of degree rather than a strict dichotomy and thereby focus on the lived experiences of people who are either the target of AVR policies or directly involved in their implementation.

Aberman’s contribution introduces the notion of “forced-voluntary return” to explore how displaced people experience Canada’s hostile immigration system and how it leads some of them to return to their countries of citizenship, a decision that they describe as neither completely voluntary nor forced. The article also details how various service providers and gatekeepers are co-opted—through policy directives and funding criteria—into reproducing state discourses of migrant deservingness. Concurrently, those actors who refuse to engage in these governing mechanisms but instead support rejected asylum seekers and other “undeserving” migrants are criminalized. Through an intersectional lens, Aberman unpacks how differentially positioned migrants experience state tactics—including coercion, manipulation, threats, and detention—

as pushing them to “agree” to leave Canada. Her ethnographic analysis sheds new light on how these policies target the most marginalized in order to ensure their compliance in violent border work.

The article by Schweitzer specifically focuses on the ambiguous role that nonstate actors very often play in AVR implementation. He looks at the cases of Austria and the UK, where government agencies have recently replaced state-sponsored NGOs as the official providers of AVR counseling. He shows that although the latter previously worked within an overall oppressive regime, their relative independence from the government put them in a better position to provide especially “vulnerable” migrants with trusted information, offer them more acceptable alternatives, and temporarily remove coercion from the return process itself. All this changes what Schweitzer conceptualizes as the “quality” of voluntariness and increases the room for migrants’ own agency and decision-making. Thus, while AVR is hardly ever completely voluntary, it can provide openings for resistance on the part of both potential returnees and implementing actors.

Recognizing the increasing salience of “voluntary” return policies also in countries of the Global South, Mencutek specifically looks at the development and implementation of “voluntary return” mechanisms in Turkey, the most important refugee host and transit country on the eastern Mediterranean route toward Europe. Her analysis illustrates different ways in which “voluntary” returns from Turkey are being institutionalized at the national and subnational levels and across multiple sites, including police stations and detention centers. Based on qualitative research including interviews with returnees and other relevant stakeholders, the article provides important insights into the role that these instruments and the very notion of “voluntariness” play in contemporary migration governance beyond the Global North.

The following three contributions, by Pierre Monforte and Gaja Maestri, Rachel Humphris and Kristin Yarris, and a conversation between Nerina Boursinou, Pierre Monforte, and Phevos Simeonidis (cofounder of the *Disinfaux* collective), shift the focus to those who voluntarily become part of the migration regime through choosing to engage with asylum seekers who have recently arrived in their local communities. These three contributions show the ambivalent position of actors who spend their time, money, and emotional resources to try to support those who they are drawn to “help.” The articles explore how perceptions, motivations, and justifications change over time as actors learn more about themselves, the purported “beneficiaries” of their actions, and the migration regime. In particular, the contributions demonstrate how the dominant legal categories used by nation state governments and their concomitant value ascriptions can inadvertently be reproduced. Voluntary actors also become aware of their potential role in propagating hostile border regimes, leading to complex entanglements, intense affects, and shifting subjectivities.

Through the analysis of the motivations and experiences of “ordinary participants” in the *Refugees Welcome* movement in Britain, Monforte and Maestri’s contribution highlights the complexity and ambivalences of their daily encounters with the people they aim to support. The article shows that, through the construction of transformative encounters based on relations of proximity with refugees, volunteers can challenge and subvert humanitarian borders that follow a logic of hierarchization and distinction between “vulnerable” refugees and “economic migrants.” However, the authors argue that these encounters can also create new hierarchies and distinctions that are based on the principle of trust, and that resonate with state-driven bordering processes defined in terms of *domopolitics*. More generally, Monforte and Maestri’s contribution shows the ambivalences of voluntariness: as they voluntarily engage to fill in the gaps of government policies, refugee support volunteers can challenge and reproduce state-driven bordering processes at the same time.

Humphris and Yarris, through comparison of Yorkshire (UK) and Oregon (USA), introduce the notion of “affective arcs” to draw attention to the importance of affect and temporality in shaping urban residents’ voluntary engagement in local migration governance. Through long-term ethnographic engagement across these two sites, they argue that “affective arcs” reveal volunteers’ understanding of “the political,” which is grounded in the underlying belief in a rational and fair nation state that has also not reckoned with historical and colonial legacies within migration governance. By not acknowledging these historical realities, volunteers’ actions inadvertently perpetuate hierarchies of deservingness as they engage in a “silent sorting” of migrants. This article therefore highlights how unlikely actors, in this case people who actively try to work against state immigration systems, may come to reproduce state categories through their ongoing actions. Moreover, through overcoming resource constraints, their tireless fundraising and support efforts can act to expand the reach of governing mechanisms. In addition, this article details how the efforts of these volunteers articulate the friction in local communities by relieving pressure on local government, hiding the violence of border regimes, and shifting resistance toward pragmatic patience.

Finally, in a conversation with Nerina Boursinou and Pierre Monforte, Phevos Simeonidis gives an account of how refugee support organizations define and negotiate their relations with public authorities in Greece. As a cofounder of the Disinfo collective—an Athens-based not-for-profit research collective that conducts in-depth investigations on human and environmental rights issues, borders and surveillance, detention and exclusion regimes, migration and displacement, and alt-right and far-right movements—he shows how different organizations active for the support of refugees position themselves vis-à-vis the state’s restrictive immigration and border control policies. In particular, the conversation shows how civil society organizations have to negotiate their role in a context in which governments attempt to control their activities, including through criminalization processes.

Taken together, the various contributions show how the notion of voluntariness works across the different sites and situations through which governments manage the messiness and incoherence of migration management. The outcome of advancing voluntariness or “governing through freedom” rather than “governing through need” is that the state shifts responsibilities, borders are more diffused, they seem more compassionate, the violence is hidden from public attention, and while these new technologies open political possibilities, they are potentially hidden from view. This Special Section is part of a continuing effort to reveal the workings of power (in the field of migration and beyond) so that we might learn how to contest it more effectively.

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■ NOTES

- 1, We note that an important limit in Foucault’s studies on power (Isin 2012) is the neglect of analyzing modernity and coloniality as two aspects of the same development in different forms of power (Mignolo 2000). We also note that our studies are primarily concerned with the “Global North” and that this is a limitation in our approach. We hope that varied perspectives on voluntariness will be developed from Global South standpoints and theoretical frames.

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