



Reframing migration research: Future-making as a practice

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Migration diplomacy treats “flows” as self-evident realities and “futures” as predictable trajectories: risks to be managed, aspirations to be measured, and movements to be modelled. This paper critiques that tendency by reframing migration through a discussion on return, (im)mobility, and the politics of knowledge production. Drawing on Erving Goffman’s work, I examine how people – migrants, their families, and their translocal communities - manage impressions and navigate “frontstage/backstage” settings across imposed returns, and everyday survival economies—contexts in which institutional audiences demand coherent narratives of fear, deservingness, and intention. Rather than approaching migration as a linear pathway from origin to destination—punctuated by “voluntary return” or “reintegration”—I argue that mobility is better understood as a contested field of decision-making shaped by shifting constraints, social obligations, and anticipatory imaginaries. My work pays attention to how migrants narrate and negotiate the future, and questions technocratic categories that stabilize policy interventions: “durable solutions,” “successful return”, “sustainable reintegration”. Building on this, the paper shows how metrics and program designs can prematurely close down the futures migrants are trying to keep open, and how research itself can reproduce the very governmental logics it seeks to analyse. Methodologically, I propose an interpretive approach that treats future-making as a practice—situated, relational, and often strategic—rather than a variable to forecast. The contribution is a reorientation of migration research from counting movements and projecting outcomes toward analysing how futures are co-produced, contested, and governed.

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