

From Social Workers to Immigration Officers? Public Welfare Institutions as a Tool for Migration Control

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In recent years, internal migration control started to play an increasingly important role in the migration policies of EU countries. In contrast to external border control, which aims at preventing ‘unwanted’ migrants from entering the EU at its borders, internal migration control aims at controlling irregular migrants that have already settled in a EU member state. To realize an effective internal migration control, new technologies and institutions such as large-scale databases and electronic surveillance systems (e.g. Schengen Information System (SIS) Eurodac and Visa Information System (VIS) have been developed and introduced (Broeders 2007, p. 72)). However, apart from those institutions that were designed specifically for migration control, also institutions that should serve completely different purposes, such as public welfare institutions, are increasingly (ab-)used to support internal migration control.

In the proposed article, we employ a theoretical lens that is informed by concepts of Michel Foucault and Gilles Deleuze to analyze and explain this shift. We argue that the increase of internal migration control as well as the increasing use of non-security institutions – such as those providing public welfare – to support internal migration control can partly be explained in terms of a shift from a “disciplinary society” (Foucault 1995) to a “society of control” (Deleuze 1992).

The concept of the disciplinary society, primarily developed in Foucault’s (1995) seminal work “Discipline and Punish” is already widely recognized in social sciences. In a disciplinary society, the focus is on enclosing, confining and fixing the subjects on whom power is exercised:

Discipline is essentially centripetal. I mean that discipline functions to the extent that it isolates a space, that it determines a segment. Discipline concentrates, focuses, and encloses. The first action of discipline is in fact to circumscribe a space in which its power and the mechanisms of its power will function fully and without limit. (Foucault et al. 2009, pp. 44–45)

In a society of control, in contrast, the focus is on the management of flows and circulations (Munro 2012). The term was developed by Deleuze (1992), who in turn built on writings and lectures of the later Foucault. One thing that distinguishes a society of control from a disciplinary society is how control is exercised: “Rather than intervene directly on the individual person, the neo-liberal apparatus of control seeks to modify the ‘milieu’ or rules of the game, in which the individual makes choices” (Munro 2012, p. 351). Applied to contemporary migration policy, this becomes most apparent in policies that “increasingly target [...] various kinds of social and economic relations” in order to “create [...] a really hostile environment for illegal migration”, as the UK government has officially described the aim of its approach (Schweitzer 2017, p. 2).

In the proposed article, we will show how public welfare institutions in the United Kingdom are increasingly utilized to create such a “hostile environment”. In the light of Foucault’s and Deleuze’s theories, it becomes apparent how seemingly small and mundane changes in the practices and policies of those institutions, that are often explained in terms of “transparency” and “efficiency”, are in fact connected to developments that aim at modifying the “milieu” of irregular migrants. Those institutions, originally designed for completely different purposes hence become tools for migration control, which is not only undesirable for irregular migrants but also poses professional and ethical dilemmas to employees of these institutions and organizations (Schweitzer 2016).

Empirically, we underpin our theoretical argument on two levels: to illustrate the general shift from “discipline” to “control” in migration policy (macro-level), we analyze recent policy developments in the United Kingdom.

To gain a deeper understanding of these changes in both policy and everyday practice, we re-read- and re-code a series of semi-structured interviews with irregular migrants and street-level bureaucrats (Lipsky 2010) working within the discussed institutions and organizations (micro-level), which were originally conducted as part of one of the authors’ PhD research (Schweitzer, forthcoming).

A theoretical argument for the usefulness of the concept of the society of control to analyze recent developments in migration control has already been made by others (e.g. Walters 2006). However, an empirical study that links these theoretical concepts with concrete every-day experiences and practices of irregular migrants and public welfare professionals is still missing. In the proposed paper, we aim to fill that gap.

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