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Fault lines in the Globalisation of Migration: Frontline workers as embodied constituents of disjunctive globalisation

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Abstract

Globalisation has become characterised by its disjunctions which the COVID-19 crisis has thrown into sharp relief (Steger and James, 2020). The contradictions (and disjunctures) between the dependence of receiving countries on economic migration and the visible tensions associated with migration, and the precarious experiences of migrants at the COVID-19 frontline marked new insecurities in migratory paths and shocks to already insecure work circuits. The fault lines revealed by the COVID-19 crisis identified in this article raise fundamental questions for globalisation and migration scholars and policy makers around the sustainability of the 'migration/value' nexus. We advocate an approach that moves away from a reductivist conception of migration as solely legitimised via the generation of economic value, towards a sustainable recovery and future after Covid -19 crises. We argue for a human rights-based approach to migration that fosters mobilities that ensures that individuals outside of it are deemed of value, of public value. We believe this can inform and help set a tenacious framework, that 'resettles' the current disjunctures of globalisation, through acknowledging different formations of mobilities through globalization for an inclusive global society. This article is part of the Global Perspectives, *Interrogating Global Studies Special Issue*, guest edited by Jill Timms and Alison Hulme, as a tribute to Dr Paul Kennedy, an ardent pioneer in the field of Global Studies.

Keywords

Global migration – frontline work – value – COVID-19 – disjunctive globalisation

Introduction

The transformation of societies on account of Brexit, the pandemic, and political attitudes and policies to migration and the fast-changing nature of migration have all reshaped debates on global mobilities. Recent debates on the globalisation of migration point to its asymmetric nature, spurred on by geopolitical and economic shifts with changes to the volume, diversity, and geography of migration (Czaika and De Haas, 2014).Focussing on the Global North (Italy and the UK in particular), this article engages in a discussion of the political, economic, and social implications of the COVID-19 pandemic on frontline migrant workers, herein understood as embodied constituents of disjunctive globalisation in the time of the Great Unsettling (Steger and James, 2020). Steger and James (2020) indeed argue that the COVID-19 crisis combined with the instabilities of the global neoliberal order have exacerbated the contradictions/the disjunctive dimension of globalisation as never before in human history. At this unprecedented juncture, we are compelled to thrive for a better understanding of the processes, drivers, and impacts of migration, and in doing so forge discussions locating mobilities in a global interconnected society. The COVID-19 pandemic has revealed fault lines within migratory processes, debates, and outcomes through marked new insecurities in migratory paths, with accompanying shocks to already precarious work circuits, either through acute changes, or job losses, or an increase in migrant exposure in COVID-19-related frontline work. We aim to capture a few of the new directions in the ongoing debates on global mobilities (such as processes, drivers, and impact) to grasp the complexity of migration and its embeddedness in processes of global transformation, as well as any potential future advances of this approach.

In this paper, we view migration as a global challenge, and its management as bordering on a 'wicked problem'; that is, a situation requiring a solution that can only be solved by those responsible for this situation (See Levin et al, 2012). We argue that the proliferation of definitions concerned with what constitutes migration and who is a migrant as well as the divergence of these definitions ought to be read in relation to the question of value (often restricted to economic value) and the contemporary struggle over values (herein understood as the fundamental principles societies believe in and seek to live by/enact). Despite recent advances with the Global Compact for Refugees (GCR) and the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration (GCM), the struggle over definitions and value(s) brings into sharp relief the need for stronger institutions, structures, or processes for coordinating a solution at a global level (see Geuijen et al, 2017). Resurfacing the question of value/values in relation to migration debates with its direct consequences on the lives of migrants, this paper explores its centrality in the COVID-19 crisis and beyond.

This paper is informed by a series of provocative talks held as part of the online Global Studies Association (GSA) colloquium in 2021 and focussing on topical global issues and their impact of our understanding of the global system. More specifically, papers by Prof. Laura Zanfrini (Università Cattolica, Milan, Italy) and Prof. John Eade (Roehampton University,

London, United Kingdom) exploring old and new (in)equalities in relation to migrations, mobilities and integration in a pandemic era inspired this paper and provided a good foundation for it. Using a narrative literature review approach (following Collins and Fauser, 2005), our paper is based on a purposive selection of secondary studies which comprehensively reflect the scope and diversity of the issues affecting the conceptualisation of, policy concerned with, and lived experiences of migrants in the Global North. Herein, we focus on mobilities to the UK, a context with a long history of diverse migration and the EU/Italy. This has allowed us to describe and compare the differential impact on different social groups and characteristics (gender, ethnicity, regions, and skills) to understand how differences in migration policy approaches can influence migration-related and societal outcomes, providing unique insights into challenges and gaps that needs addressing. Focussing on the lived experiences of migrants during the COVID-19 crisis and the concomitant exacerbation of the question of value/values in migration debates during the acute phase of the pandemic and beyond, our paper contributes to recent substantive literature on migration by providing key insights derived from our discussion.

Limitations to our approach ought to be acknowledged: our literature review is not exhaustive, and focusses on the specific contexts of the UK, and the EU/Italy seeking to provide a cross section overview of different types of migration. In terms of organising this paper, first, we discuss some recent debates and approaches on global migration, then examine the case of frontline economic migrant workers who disproportionately form the essential sector workforce in many countries, before asking some questions on public value and values we can extract from this discussion.

Global mobilities or the impact of the narrowing prism of value (over values): a short discussion

We undeniably live in an age of heightened and diverse migration, as illustrated by both the rising trends in the international movements of different groups of people crossing borders for a growing range of reasons and the growing space occupied by migration-related questions in public debates. Whilst there are changes to destination countries, new patterns in geopolitical shifts based on migration governance policies and immigration systems, the broad consensus is that migration is here to stay. Theorists have long discussed the need to go beyond the push-pull framework to capture the complexity of contemporary migration(s), as the global flow of people is now an integral part of society, accompanied and shaped by processes of social change, be it geo-political shifts, social and demographic trends, economic restructuring and/or technological progress. Meanwhile, the Brexitisation of societies (Verhofstadt, 2018), changing political attitudes and policies to migration, as well as the skewed nature of post-colonial migration, have reshaped debates on global mobilities. However, the structural shifts in demand for care labour and receiving countries' dependence on economic migration (See for example, Williams, 2011) irrespective of skill

sets, for the delivery of essential services, social care and economic production demonstrably expose the framing of skillset-based immigration policies in some countries (Zanfrini, 2019). Played out in a global field, mobility is an integral part of the neo-liberal era in which economic migrants are key stakeholders in the growth of developed economies (Kesselring, 2014: Bauder, 2012: Arun, 2018). Arun et al (2019) place the processes and forms of migrant transnationalism firmly in the context of wider economic and political processes; neoliberal globalisation and the neoliberalisation of societies intensify precarity, which increasingly becomes a structuring element of migrants' lives, as made apparent by the COVID-19 crisis and explored in this paper. Notwithstanding this, it is important to note here that not every country joins this competition to attract skilled workers with equal commitment, as shown by the substantial failure of the EU 'Blue card' program (de Lange, 2020). Italy, for instance, never planned a selection of immigrants based on their skills and, on the contrary, the country seems to exert 'a particular attraction towards low educated immigration' (Zanfrini, 2022: 52). However, the stress that both scientific and political debate poses on the relevance of highly skilled migrants for developed countries sometimes seems to hide the essential role played, for these same countries, by the large mass of unskilled migrants (Glick Schiller, 2011). Needless to say, the pandemic contributed to highlighting this continued relevance around the complexities of migration processes.

As is often the case with forms of crises, such as the 2007-2009 global Great Recession and/or Brexit in the UK for example, studies have pointed to the moral view of the self-sufficient migrant (Anderson, 2010; Root et al., 2014) or the risky alignments for resourceful skilled economic migrants (Arun, 2018) alongside the emphasis on the economic value of the frontline migrant workers during the COVID-19 pandemic or that of the unskilled workers in times of skill shortages (Zanfrini, 2022), rather than reaching out to other resource-demanding migrant groups, such as refugees affected by conflicts and human rights abuse. A narrow view of migration, or a uni-directional policy, complemented by the economic forces of neoliberalism (hastened by skill shortages) have charged debates on the precarity and complexity of global migration (Standing, 2011). Evidence points to how migrant workers are preponderant in low-skilled sectors, with insecure contracts, lower social security, or protection with temporary forms of citizenship and marked by extreme social inequalities (Reid-Musson, 2014; Standing, 2011), characterised as the '3 D' jobs: dirty, dangerous, and demanding (Castles, 2002). Thus, for a long time, global migration has exposed the tip of the iceberg on deep-seated and masked inequalities, that are often gendered and racialised (Arun et al, 2019; Raghuram, 2014; McDowell, 2008; Purkasyasta, 2005), revealing the broad spectrum of migrant experiences. For example, the increasing presence of migrant care workers, many of them women, bring in a new political economy of care (Arun, 2009; Kofman and Raghuram, 2015; Dyer et al., 2008; Williams, 2011). On the other hand, the feminisation of international migration continues to reshape women's experiences and patterns of migration, including transnational family relations. For example, the impact of uncertain migratory contexts and citizenship status brought by Brexit affects

European migrant mothers' lives and migrant community building (Brahic, 2020), pointing to the affective, racialised and gendered dimensions of citizenship statuses and their susceptibility to changing political contexts. Such contradictions and complexities in women's lives also redefines relationships between migrants and their integration into 'our' larger global society. Furthermore, the pattern of historical migration in the Global North has not only conflated issues of race, ethnic inequalities and migration but also raised questions about migrants' integration, thus scholars call for new lines of inquiry that highlight the underlying racialized power and inequalities that structure im/migration incorporation that recognises coloniality of power within the intersection of race and migration (Arun et al, 2023; Olmos, 2019). Often migrants (foreign-born workers) are not only identified on their Black, Asian, and Minority Ethnic (BAME) status but also framed as socially constructed racialised categories reflecting the demographic fabric of the host society, which are hierarchical and unequal, as seen through the impact of the pandemic (Eade, 2021; Flynn, 2021). Perhaps the question is to what extent the debates around migration should include its (economic) value to both the host and home countries, and to migrants themselves. To provide an example of migration governance in the EU, taking the case of Italy, the debate on immigration is only marginally focused on economic issues. The Italian debate is mostly articulated between, on the one side, the value of solidarity as a pillar of Italian culture and tradition and, on the other side, the menace of migration towards security and Italian identity (Urso, 2018).

Frontline work and migrant workers or the struggle for the recognition of risks and costs in the changing – yet still hegemonic – landscape of 'value' in the COVID-19 crisis.

The previous section offered a discussion of some of the salient issues shaping current migration debates. As suggested above, the question of value is ubiquitous and central in these debates as it is in globalisation debates particularly on wicked problems. For example Geuijen et al (2017; 636) argue how such a framework 'enables a vision of value that is global, collective and public, by including voices of 'all affected interests' even when discourses prove to be extremely conflicting'. The subsequent section explores the theme of value in the context of work in the frontline during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted health systems, social structures, economies, politics, and the daily lives of various social groups across the globe, but evidence suggests a disproportionate impact on migrant workers (OECD, 2020; Caselli et al. 2024). In many countries, the pandemic revealed how many societies are 'empirically multicultural and, indeed, could not function without their ethnic minority citizens and migrant populations, both settled and temporary' (Bhambra, 2021:1). In Italy, the pandemic contributed to raising public awareness about this dependence resulting in the Italian government

launching an amnesty to regularise undocumented migrants working in the care and agricultural sectors, to support the national economy (Zanfrini 2022). What happened showed once more the contradictions of the Italian approach to immigration, which swings between political rejection and economic acceptance (and need) of immigration (Ambrosini, 2013). Yet, despite being central to the fabric and functioning of societies, ethnic minorities and migrant background communities often remain marginalised and face inequality rooted in the intersections of race, gender, class, and migration status among other factors. Migrant youth and young adults are some of the most vulnerable in society, experiencing oppression, alienation, and marginalisation. Migrant youth have larger gaps in educational outcomes compared to their peers, due to a lack of resources to support their integration into education, language differences, institutional systems, and other factors (Ribeiro et al., 2019). They often face a complex combination of intersecting barriers making it difficult to transition and succeed into further education and/or the world of work. These pre-existing challenges alongside structural socio-economic inequalities, access to housing, education and health services in particular have been heightened by the COVID-19 crisis (Santagati M. 2022).

A report by the Overseas Development Institute (Kumar et al., 2020) calls for the recognition and valuing of the fundamental contribution of migrant workers as key workers in our societies and economies throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. In addition to working in the low-paid labour market, evidence from many countries shows that many of these workers have risked their lives disproportionately being on the frontline of the crisis as nurses, security guards, drivers etc., deprived of the privileges (e.g., work from home option) or levels of social protection (sick or statutory leave) other workers enjoyed. In the US, before the COVID-19 pandemic, more than 30 million US workers were employed in six broad industries that came to form the front lines of the response, that included grocery store clerks, nurses, cleaners, warehouse workers, and bus drivers, among others. They were essential before the pandemic hit, yet also overworked, underpaid, under-protected, and underappreciated (OECD, 2020). Furthermore, people of colour are overrepresented in many occupations within frontline industries. 'Just over four-in-ten (41.2 percent) frontline workers are Black, Hispanic, Asian-American/Pacific Islander, or some category other than white' (Rho et al., 2020: 3). All this unequal incorporation in the economy and society was accentuated with the pandemic as highlighted in the initial evidence on the unequal impact of COVID-19. For example, a report commissioned by the UK Labour Party in 2020 found that structural racism had led to the disproportionate impact of the coronavirus pandemic on BAME communities as they were 'overexposed, under protected, stigmatised and overlooked' (Lawrence, 2020: 4). Such structural inequalities are deep-seated, exposing inequalities in housing and health services, affecting BAME communities in the UK. A Women and Equalities Committee Report (Mrc, 2020) found that ethnicity is an important factor in overcrowding, as one in three Bangladeshi families live in overcrowded housing, which is around 33% compared to 2% of white British households and approximately 15% of

black African households, which substantially increased exposure to COVID-19 infection as social distancing was more difficult, particularly within multigenerational households and those migrant groups affected by No Recourse to Public Funds (NRPF) visa conditions. In Italy, Covid had a particularly severe impact on irregular immigrants. In many cases, they lost their jobs and, given their irregular status, were unable to benefit from the subsidies implemented by the State. Furthermore, they often did not access the health services guaranteed to all (including irregular migrants) for fear of being reported and expelled from the country even if, according to Italian law, irregular migrants cannot be reported to and by the Police when accessing health facilities and structures. It is interesting to note here that the aforementioned amnesty launched at the beginning of the pandemic by the Italian government did not improve this situation: procedures for amnesty were managed at a dramatically slow pace, creating a large group of people who actually did not know if they could be considered as regular or irregular migrants (Caselli et al., 2024).

In general, migrants as a group were adversely affected in many ways during the pandemic. In an effort to recognise the economic contribution of migrants during the pandemic, some positive efforts were put in place to redress structural and legal inequalities. For example, in the UK, despite the long-standing widespread resistance to easing migration in the backdrop of Brexit, Home Office relaxed visa regulations for foreign care workers and farm workers (from the EU) because of labour shortages. From December 2021, care staff was added to the Shortage Occupation List in response to the pandemic pressures. These workers could bring their families, enabling a settlement route in the UK. In addition to this, the immigration health surcharge reimbursement scheme was put in place to exempt all health and care workers from the surcharge following outstanding efforts throughout the pandemic. Nonetheless, organisations supporting migrant rights continue to call for more protection and extension of social citizenship rights for all migrants irrespective of status, as well as to demand that immigration policies no longer take a 'skill-based' approach, from inflexible 'low' and 'high' skills classifications, as workers of all skill levels will be essential in the long path to recovery (Migrants' Rights Network et al., 2020). One key aspect here is that some migrant groups are restricted in their access to public services by their legal status and without recourse to public funds ('NRPF'), with an increased number of migrant women with NRPF at risk of destitution due to the devastating impact of the pandemic on their lives and livelihoods (Brahic et al., 2024, forthcoming). A report found that 14% of those with NRPF have been unable to pay their rent or mortgage on time compared to 2% of those with recourse to public funds (Migrants' Rights Network et al., 2020). As migrants are overrepresented in those sectors most affected by the pandemic such as the hospitality industry, emerging evidence shows that in European OECD countries, the initial impact has been disproportionately negative on immigrants in the vast majority of countries, even when job retention schemes have been put in place to alleviate the impact of the lockdowns (OECD, 2020), where many migrants have then returned to their home countries as they fall outside such safety nets, or fall prey to further exploitation in their workplace.

Public value of migrant work and/or public values towards migration

The highly skewed spatial impacts of globalization also seem to be reflected in shifts in global migration patterns (de Haas et al., 2020). As in the UK, Anderson (2010) argues how, whilst immigration controls are often presented by government as a means of ensuring 'British jobs for British workers' and protecting migrants from exploitation, in practice such mobilities can often undermine labour protections. Such mechanisms also curtail flexibility of mobility and full integration into the economy and society that migrants live in. The fault lines revealed by the COVID-19 crisis and identified in this article raise fundamental questions for globalisation and migration scholars as well as policy makers around the sustainability of the nexus between neoliberal skill-based migration policies, external dependence on frontline workers and the future of the health and care system, a key sector for the public good.

The direct and associated impact of the pandemic, through lockdowns, travel bans, and work effects has led to a paradigm shift in general changes to social attitude and economic behaviour. It cannot be denied that migrants as a social category faced many adversities, the imagery captured by the long queues of desperate internal migrants in India, walking hundreds of miles to reach the safety of their homes. Thus, for scholars like Massey (2019), such disruptions to patterns of mobilities compel social scientists to pay more theoretical and empirical attention to 'perceived threats' due to forced migration with the need for more nuanced understanding on mobilities.

Here we propose to define public value, borrowing from Benington (2009: 233), 'public value can be thought of in two main ways: first, what the public values; second, what adds value to the public sphere'. Exploring the experiences of migrant workers in frontline occupations during the pandemic reveals some of the core contradictions paralysing global migration into a state of permanent crisis and, in turn, inhibiting progress towards a human, fair and sustainable governance of migration. During the pandemic, overwhelming evidence shows how disproportionately migrants were exposed to the risk of infection because of their low-skilled jobs (in agriculture, logistics, home care, etc.) which were nevertheless essential in order to allow other people to stay safe at home (Fondazione Ismu, 2022). As discussed above, global migration and their management are the product of globalisation as we know it, both disjunctive and unsettled (Steger and James, 2020). Crucially both are regulated by the logic of the neoliberal project which sees 'value' as its central legitimising principle. Yet as value as a rationale for action grows more central and unchallenged, its meaning appears to shrink to match the contours of productive value/the value of paid work. The centrality but narrowness of the rhetoric of value gives rise to a series of contradicting trends and tensions gripping global migration (and inhibiting the

conceptualisation of global migration as a global social issue, by opposition to one contained by nation-states). Furthermore, the focus on productive value leads to the hierarchisation of migrants, blighting lives, and marginalising many (even further).

The notion of value is core to the categorisation of migrants, it being in everyday life, in policy work and/or academic research. Commonly accepted categorisations of migrants (privileged/lifestyle-related, migrant workers, asylum-related, irregular and dependants/family) however contested or fallacious they may be, are framed in terms of value. Privileged migrants, often self-styled expats, are framed and explicitly regulated in terms of value. From 'high net worth' individuals engaged in migration investment purchasing 'golden entry tickets' to more 'modest' self-reliant migrants demonstrating financial self-sufficiency to be granted right of abode, privileged migrants bring their value, and pay upfront which, in turn, appears to free them from the questions (suspicions) migrants commonly experience in relation to (their) value. However, being 'beyond' (public) value can be a fleeting privilege as British expats retiring in Southern Europe found out when free movement (and its associated integrated systems in relation to healthcare and to a lesser extent pensions) stopped for British citizens after the UK left the European Union. More recently, in the context of the invasion of Ukraine by Russian forces, Russian oligarchs established in London under the now defunct Tier 1 investor visa (or Tier 1 investor migrant dependent) which allowed so-called 'high value' individuals with at least two million pounds investment funds to apply for residency rights, found themselves threatened with financial sanctions and dragged onto the terrain of values, facing suspicion that their political allegiances/values may pose a threat to the UK (with suspicion of interference with the UK democratic processes) . These recent examples highlight some of the limits associated with placing 'value' – interpreted narrowly as financial/monetary value – at the centre of migration policies.

The generation/creation of economic value through work has historically been a core driver of migration. In countries regulating incoming migration around labour needs, from guest worker programmes to skills-based migration systems (with the distinction between skilled and unskilled work underpinning migration policies), migration policies have been designed to maximise the value derived from the arrival of migrant workers (and minimise the perceived costs associated with the migration of their families/significant others). By contrast, in countries which do not have which do not have a consolidated and well-defined migration policy such as Italy, the 'policy' on migration seems to be more oriented to minimize the risks connected to migration than to maximize the advantages (Zanfrini, 2019). Through work, migrant workers ought to sustain themselves and their families but also generate value (in responding to a perceived need). Work has hitherto been the preferred pathway for integration and citizenship and is promised to socialise adult migrants into the host society. Paradoxically, as discussed in the case of frontline work during the pandemic, the perception that certain types of occupations are taken on by migrants can lead to their

devaluation (in real and symbolic terms) and their 'feminisation' as described by Standing (2011). As pointed out by Zanfrini (2022), the dominant working inclusion model used to legitimise migration by proponents of pro-migration discourses dangerously insists on the benefits associated with having a docile and disposable workforce at the ready. Rationalising the value of migration (and migrants) through the lens of human capital marginalises many (already marginalised along the lines of race, ethnicity, gender, age, health, and disability) and limits long-term prospects of civic 'incorporation' to the social contract, beyond work (and beyond first generations). Here we draw on Ruhs' work (2013) articulating the trade-off between the rights afforded to migrant workers and the openness of labour migration regimes. Ruhs' argument shows the complex interplay between rights and migration, particularly one that is based on economic considerations. This conflict is played out in high income countries, which rely on migrants working at lower costs even when their rights are constrained. We see this in the recent changes to the immigration and visa rules for incoming care migrant workers to the UK who can no longer bring dependents to the UK after March 2024, despite the health and social care sector being highly dependent on foreign workers to undertake care work in nursing homes. Here the right of workers to have a family life, or the right of the children of migrants to enjoy a secure and full childhood, is fully denied.

The question of value becomes acute for migrants crossing borders outside a context of paid work. At best their arrival is met with suspicion (Borrelli et al, 2021), at worst it is criminalised. Individuals crossing borders to study or to live with significant others face a growing number of barriers and controls assessing their 'worth'. In the case of students, their 'value' is derived from the fees paid to educational institutions and stipend spent locally and/or from the prospect of trainees plugging a gap in the economy. Applications on grounds of family ties tend to be assessed in relation to value/worth (disposable income) of the applicants' sponsors. The logic of value (narrowly understood as 'economic value' in migration systems) reaches breaking point in the case of asylum-related migration when it collides with the demands of 'our' (moral) values. The so-called migration crisis stems from the neoliberal diktat of 'economic' value being central to and increasingly becoming the sole rationale in the management of global migrations and which leads states and their citizens to relinquish their duties to uphold basic human rights. In practical terms, the contradictions perceived between the economic imperative to generate value, or to prevent a value loss and the moral imperative to defend human rights/values result in the criminalisation of asylum with a shift towards restrictive 'controlled' schemes (as seen with the growing number of resettlement schemes – in contrast with 'traditional' asylum routes) temporary and precarious statuses as well as the externalisation, privatisation and deterritorialisation of its management. This bid to deliver humanitarianism within the bounds of austerity results in generalised moral failure and a collective loss of values (in the name of economic value). States, institutions, and markets have followed suit in pursuing 'entrepreneurial' strategies for bringing in migrant workers to reduce economic costs in host nations,

primarily in the Global North. We argue that public value should delve into the concept of social value, which will allow us to reflect on public value beyond conventional economic measures, and profit maximisation, inclusion and wellbeing. We draw on literature such as social enterprises which is commonly used for leveraging welfare of society without referring to ethical measures and often deployed as neo-classical economic-oriented utilitarian paradigms (Korsgaard and Anderson, 2011; Lautermann, 2013). They draw on discourses that are viewed as 'economic issues that need to be better managed' (Hjorth and Bjerke, 2006; 119 cited in Lautermann 2013). Migration is seen to be an economic problem both in terms of solving labour shortages and as a drain on the welfare state. Another illustration of these contradictions is the strong financial support offered in recent years by the EU to the countries of transit of migrants – to Turkey in particular (European Commission, 2016), leaving it the 'dirty job' of stemming migratory flows. The plan is to stop migrants before they reach Europe's borders, so that EU countries can (apparently) escape the moral issues related to rejection and forced return (Caselli, 2019).

The logic of value comes to a head with the elusive category of irregular migrations which has attracted growing attention in the political/public discourses. By definition, irregular migration is difficult to know both in quantitative and qualitative terms. Because of the dominant framing of undocumented migrants as standing outside of legality (made transparent by the growing use – deliberate or unknowing – of the problematic term 'illegal migrant'), undocumented migrants wrestle with dehumanisation (stemming from the fact that they cannot be 'known' and monitored in ways other individuals are, such as migrants and non-migrants) and demonisation (framed in legal terms, they are also 'evaluated' on the terrain of moral righteousness (Watkins, 2020). Dehumanisation and demonisation aggravate their vulnerability as undocumented migrants, prevent their visibility and representation, and cast them as 'valueless' and underserving (of rights, protection, and support).

Concluding remarks

As argued in this paper, the concept of value needs to be systematically resurfaced and critically examined in the study on global migration. The unique set of conditions of the pandemic have opened up/amplified the space of moral righteousness (doing what is right by opposition to what is legal or illegal – e.g.: adopting preventative COVID-19 measures to protect public health) as a means for migrants to 'be of value'. Recast as heroes, frontline workers saved the day. Whilst it may temporarily amplify the contribution of migrants in societies, this discourse can also be dangerous (Cox, 2020) and lead to the perception that the value of migrants resides with their self-sacrifice, overwork, and dutiful selflessness (which in turn puts their protection in jeopardy).

Thus, as migration discourses continue to be dominated by neoliberal, nation-state and ethnicity-centric epistemologies that produce reductionist understandings of migrants as social categories within the field of global studies (Arun et al, 2023), we make a call to address this epistemological pitfall within global studies research for renewed definitions, conceptualisations, and praxis around global migration. As human activity is increasingly becoming migratory and in motion, we add to the plea for a new paradigm shift that centres mobility and motion, rather than fixity and statis (Nail 2019; Arun et al 2023). This will also enable the reframing of migrant categories within dominant narratives in relation to the 'other'.

Shaping a fair, post-pandemic world where no-one is left behind (UNEP, 2021) is the defining issue of our times. The OECD (2020) highlights how resilient recovery from the COVID-19 crisis depends on investment in training schemes and transition into the labour market. Whilst this is a start, this will not be enough. Reductivist conceptions of migration as solely justified/legitimised via the generation of economic value are problematic in many ways, not least because economic value is situational and transient (putting humans and the environment at risk). We argue that a sustainable recovery and future can only be based on a human rights-based approach to migration (and its corollary 'integration') which does not exclude integration to the labour market (but actually fosters it) and ensures that individuals outside of it (temporarily and permanently) are deemed of value, of public value.

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