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## **The politics of migration categories: The case of the ‘economic refugee’ in the Netherlands**

Kolpa, Renee

### **Citation**

Kolpa, R. (2022). *The politics of migration categories: The case of the ‘economic refugee’ in the Netherlands*.

Version: Not Applicable (or Unknown)

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# **The politics of migration categories: The case of the 'economic refugee' in the Netherlands**

**Renee Kolpa**

**S2487136**

Bachelor Thesis



**Universiteit Leiden**

BSc Political Science

Faculty of Social and Behavioural Science

Thesis Seminar: Global Migration

Supervisor: Dr. Katharina Natter

December 24<sup>th</sup>, 2021

Word Count: 7871

## PREFACE

I saw a reflection of the unfolding of the project called life in the unfolding of my thesis project. I would like to present to you a piece that I wrote on a particular day when I was feeling overwhelmed. Not only has the piece motivated me to accept the chaotic process of developing my thesis, but its deeper meaning also reflects my broader critique of reducing people to their temperamental characteristics: There is no such thing as a refugee, that lives separated from time. What people do in a single moment does not define them. Reducing and fixating one's identity - is a act of murder.

*'I was touched by the deeper realization that every feeling is a mixed feeling. I was touched by the realization that I am merely a possibility, thrown into life bounded by temporality, a project that I must unfold. Keeping in mind that the ground beneath my feet is an illusion, which it is nothing more than a thin thread stretched from my birth to a destination Unknown. I am the one who makes the ground under my feet is firm or wobbly, whether I am able to balance or fall from it, recognizing with full conviction that in the future the possibility of falling off is not a possibility, but a certainty. How to balance on the thread of life when every feeling is a mixed feeling, I wondered. Sartre, Heidegger and Levinas gave me more insights on this question. Acknowledge your mixed feelings, but don't wander in them too long in your head, live. Make a choice and accept that this is your project for which you have chosen and take responsibility for it. Know that you also have all the freedom to step away from it again, because who you are is not fixed. But in the unfolding of my own project I leave traces for the Other. Recognise that you are connected to the Other, that the Other is also a thrown project with an open existention. Let the face of the Other pervade you' – 2021*

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## INTRODUCTION

In the Dutch debate on migration, we can identify a particular type of migrant: the ‘economic refugee’ (*‘economische vluchteling’*). While this person does not exist in legal terms, it does exist in the collective imagination of the Dutch, as the economic refugee is often the topic of migration debates. For instance, when politicians speculate on television about the number of so-called economic refugees applying for asylum, as CDA party leader Hoekstra did during the 2021 election debate: ‘I believe that three-quarters of the asylum applications are from economic refugees’ (Hoekstra, 2021). This simplistic depiction of individuals on the move infuses public discourse. As the imaginary mass of ‘economic refugees’ knocking on the Dutch door is not unnoticed by Dutch citizens, as illustrated by the following tweet: ‘Let’s be grateful to the Poles for doing everything they can to stop these economic refugees. If it were up to the EU, these hopeless people would have walked in. It would be an example for the Netherlands to keep the borders closed’ (Benthem, 2021). This is just one of many examples of how the economic refugee is being used discursively in public and political debates. As such, the use of the migration category ‘economic refugee’ is common practice. But why? And who is the ‘economic refugee’? How did this migrant category come into existence? And importantly, what purpose does it serve?

This thesis can be regarded as a critique of the migrant category ‘economic refugee’. A critique, as Foucault put it:

*‘does not consist in saying that things are not good the way they are. It consists in seeing on just what type of assumptions, of familiar notions, of established and unexamined ways of thinking the accepted practices are based’* (Foucault, 2003, p. 172).

By doing so, this thesis contributes to a growing body of literature that challenges how lives on the move are categorised in public, political, and academic spheres. Scholars have deconstructed the migrant categories in different ways, for example by examining how the categorisation of migrants does not accurately reflect the complex migration dynamics (e.g., Crawley & Skleparis, 2018), how categories are constructed in the academic arena (e.g., Haddad, 2004; Dahinden, Fischer & Menet, 2021), in the public arena (e.g., O’Doherty & Lecouteur, 2007; Taylor, 2021; Goodman & Speer, 2007; Yantseva, 2021; Kunz, 2020; De Coninck, 2020), in policy arena (e.g., Duvell, 2012; Becker 2014, Elrick & Schwartzman, 2015;

Sajjad, 2018), in the political arena (e.g., Zetter, 2007; Rowe and O'Brien, 2014), in legal discourse (e.g., Kritzman-Amir, 2020) and how categorising migrants has negative consequences for those on the move who are subjected to these categorisations (e.g., Janmyr & Mourad, 2018). However, the emphasis on how people on the move are socially and politically constructed and the real-life consequences of these constructions have obscured the political processes that underpin migrant categories. As a result, there is a gap in the literature regarding the political goal of constructing and using the category.

Going beyond examining how people on the move are categorised, this thesis focuses explicitly on the political purpose of such a construction and its use. By adopting the concept of discursive psychology, I understand the category as a discursive recourse or strategic vehicle discursively utilised to accomplish a specific goal (Potter, 1996). The emphasis on explicating this goal and not so much on the representation adds an original contribution due to the debate.

Additionally, in light of the ever-expanding catalogue of categories – family migrants, labour migrants, asylum seekers, economic migrants, illegal, returned, economic refugee – to name a few, this thesis seeks to contribute to an understanding of the trend that Apostolova (2015) named ‘categorical fetishism’, by discussing the ‘economic refugee’ instead of the more traditional categories of ‘refugee’ or ‘migrant’. Moreover, the centrality of ‘economic refugee’ is also of social relevance: the widely used category ‘economic refugee’ conveys substantive objectivity, thereby ignoring the category's political nature. Which results in people adopting uncritically the term and hence unintentionally reproducing a status quo they actually oppose. Therefore, deconstructing this category - which entails explicating the implicit political processes upon which the category rests - helps to create awareness on the power of terminology or categories.

Hence, this thesis will examine the highly politicised but little-examined category of ‘economic refugees’ often used in the Netherlands. It seeks to deconstruct this category by examining its function in Dutch parliamentary discourse, specifically by asking: ‘What purpose does the category ‘economic refugee’ serve in Dutch political discourse?’ This thesis conducts a discourse analysis of 186 extracts from parliamentary transcripts dating from 1964 to 2020 that contain the term 'economic refugee.' The main finding is that the category ‘economic refugee’ serves to legitimise exclusionary politics in political discourse.

The remainder of this thesis first introduces research on the politics of migration categories in general. The second section presents the data and methodology used. The third section discusses the purpose the category ‘economic refugee’ serves. Finally, I conclude by paving the way for a new direction for critical migration studies.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

This literature section gives an overview of the literature on the politics of migrant categorisation, dives into the problematic nature of these categories, and clarifies why deconstructing migrant categories - the motive of this study - is vital. Subsequently, I will propose how to move the debate further to get a more comprehensive understanding of the politics underlying migration categories.

### The problem with migrant categories

Schrover and Moleny (2013) sharply note: ‘all people are equal, according to Tomas Jefferson, but all migrants are not’ (p.7). Because not all people who cross international borders are entitled to the same rights, protections, and other resources, all migrants are not equal. What a person is entitled to, depends on the type of migrant this person is according to the state, i.e., which category this person belongs to (Sajjad 2018; Crawley & Skleparis, 2018; De Coninck, 2020; Collyer & de Haas, 2012). Therefore, scholars argue that migrant categories are the means through which power is exercised (Jones, 2008; Collyer & de Haas, 2012; Walters, 2013; Sajjad, 2018). Collyer and de Haas (2012), for example, argue that categories are an ‘essential tool of power’, because of how the state categorises people on the move - as an asylum seeker, refugee, economic migrant, family migrant, irregular migrant, victim of trafficking - will ‘affect issues of resource distribution, residential location, labour rights, and ultimately, for the most serious questions such as refugee status determination, life or death’ (p. 468). As a result, categories have a lot of influence on people's lives.

On the surface, it may appear unproblematic. After all, this is how politics works. For example, the prime definition of politics is ‘authoritative allocation of value’ (Easton, 1953, p.129). The existence of distinct groups is a necessary condition for value allocation, as there will be no value allocated if distinct groups do not exist. For instance, as a higher education student, I am entitled to certain privileges and resources that a high school student is not e.g., as a university student, I am entitled to student loan. However, the distinctions made between people who cross international borders are of a completely different kind, as who constitutes a student is significantly less ambiguous than who constitutes a migrant. The literature identifies the following problematic qualities of migrant categories:

First, there is a wide agreement that distinctions made between people on the move are extremely simplistic, as the categories do not match the complex reality that drives migration (Jones, 2009; Crawley & Skleparis, 2018; Sajjad, 2018, Dahinden, Fischer & Menet, 2021).

Research has shown that categories that reduce migration reasons to a single reason – escaping conflict or seeking a better economic future – are inadequate to describe the complex motives of individuals leaving a country that is intertwined with social, political, economic drivers (Crawley and Skleparis 2018). For example, a Syrian man moved out of the country driven by economic reasons. However, categorising him as an economic migrant is inaccurate, as the economic conditions were shaped by the conflict (Crawley and Skleparis 2018). The categorisation of this sort is a ‘top-down technique’, fixing ‘dynamic social processes into rigid structures’ (Collyer & de Haas, 2012, p. 468), resulting in a simplistic understanding of migration (Jones, 2009). Thus, despite their portrayal as representing the real world, these categories do not.

Second, the process of constructing the categories is not a neutral process, rather it reflects a highly politicised process (Castles, 2000; Jones, 2008; Collyer & de Haas, 2012; Walters, 2013; Sajjad, 2018; Kunz, 2020). Who is assigned to which category is shaped by broader power structures, enacting a ‘normative claim about the differentiation of human movement and belonging’ (Kunz, 2020, p.2151). Kunz (2020) who deconstructs the migrant-expatriate nexus, exposes the racial tendencies and symbolic hierarchy encoded in this dichotomy: a white-skinned person is categorised as an expatriate. However, a dark-skinned person is categorised as a migrant, even though the motivation to move is of the same nature. Moreover, because the boundaries between the categories are not fixed, but porous (Jones, 2008, Jones 2009; O’Doherty & Lecouteur, 2007), they can easily be exploited. An example of the flexible boundaries in practice is when the United States (US) categorised El Salvadorians seeking asylum due to the civil war in the ‘80s, as ‘economic migrants’ rather than ‘refugees’, because granting them asylum would contradict US foreign policy, which backed the government during the civil war (Menjvar & Cervantes, 2018). The vast majority of Salvadorians were denied asylum as a result of the United States’ refusal to recognise them as refugees, leaving them with no legal standing in the country (Menjvar & Cervantes, 2018). This example further demonstrates how a political process - rather than a neutral process - shapes who falls under which migrant category. And how this has real-life consequences for the people put into a category.

### Moving the debate further

A migrant category is thus far more than just a ‘migrant category’: it is a powerful tool. Therefore, scholars have expressed the need to critique these categories and investigate the politics behind them (see: Jones, 2008; Janmyr & Mourad, 2018; Crawly & Skleparis; Sajjad,



2018; Kunz, 2020; De Coninck, 2020; Dahinden Fischer & Menet, 2021). In particular, Crawley and Skleparis (2018) ask scholars to engage '*in the process by which categories are constructed, the purpose that they serve and their consequences*' (p.60). This is the motivating force behind this research. This thesis seeks to move the debate on migrant categorisation further in two ways: (1) by focusing explicitly on the purpose behind migration categorisation, and (2) by exploring one hitherto under-researched, yet highly politicised subcategory of migrant, the so-called economic refugee.

First of all, while scholars have discussed the broader purpose of migrant categorization, an explicit examination of the political purpose can improve the understanding of the politics of migrant categories. The current state of the knowledge on this topic is based mostly on by-products rather than the results of a systematic study on this topic. Scholars have argued that categories serve to differentiate between those who are legitimate and those who are not (Collyer, de Haas, 2012; Sajjad, 2018; Crawley & Skleparis, 2018; De Coninck, 2020; Dahinden, Fischer, & Menet 202), thereby determining 'who is considered deserving protection under the Western asylum regime and who should be excluded' (Sajjad, 2018, p.41). And that for example, the dichotomy of refugee versus migrant 'serve to perpetuate and reinforce an oversimplified dichotomy used to categorise, divide, and discriminate between those on the move' (Crawley and Skleparis, 2018, p. 52). Thus, the purpose of categorising people on the move is commonly understood in the literature as enabling practices of exclusion. This understanding, however, is often based on reflections from a larger empirical study of migration drivers and categories. Moreover, these scholars I just discussed, have rarely focused on the political purpose of categories explicitly. As such, the specific purpose of constructing and using the categories in the political arena has yet to be investigated systematically, which is the focus of this research.

Second, this thesis advances the debate on migrant categorisation by looking into the dynamics behind a particular migrant subcategory. Most studies focus on deconstructing the traditional dichotomous categories of 'migrant' versus 'refugee' (for example, Schuster, 2011; Millner, 2011; Crawley and Skleparis, 2017), or 'legal' versus 'illegal' (for example, de Genova, 2002; Hsia, 2015; Yeoh and Chee, 2015), leaving out subcategories such as 'economic refugee' that have become dominant in political and public discourse. This thesis fills this gap by concentrating on a single subcategory in-depth: the economic refugee.

## METHOD

This section discusses the selection of the category ‘economic refugee’ as a case, the selection of the data and discusses the method of analysing this data, to answer the following question:

*‘What purpose does the category ‘economic refugee’ serve in Dutch political discourse?’*

### Case selection

#### ‘Economic refugee’ in the Dutch context

Apart from the reasons stated above for focusing on the category of economic refugee – namely, the taken-for-granted status, under-examined and to take a subcategory as starting point – the category of ‘economic refugee’ also provides interesting material. First, the category is at the intersection of two well-known categories: economic migrants and refugees. Second, there is no definition of an ‘economic refugee’ (Rijpma, 2021; UNHCR, n.d.). This in-betweenness and indeterminacy of the category may create room for ambiguity, allowing for multiple interpretations and enabling opportunism, making the category ‘economic refugee’ an interesting case.

While the term is also used in Austria and Germany, I only examine the use in the Dutch context. Given the centrality of interpretation of meaning in qualitative research, interpreting it in the language I am most skilled with - the Dutch language - minimises the possibility of loss of meaning (van Nes, Abma, Johnsson et al., 2010). Additionally, I am more acquainted with the Dutch context, including the history of the approach towards immigration and the political landscape organised around attitude towards immigration. Regarding this, the Netherlands provides interesting material because it enables us to look at the use of ‘economic refugee’ by parties with varying attitudes towards immigration and to look at changes in use over time.

### Data collection

To answer my research question, I will systematically analyse primary data in the form of parliamentary debates. First, parliamentary data is appropriate for examining the political purpose behind using the category, because, within parliamentary debates, language is used for specific purposes such as ‘decision-making, information, persuasion, and legitimation’ (van Dijk, 2013, p.91). Second, as a representative body, all political parties participate in the debates. This allows for an examination of how parties along the spectrum use it.

I obtained transcriptions of parliamentary debates online via the official website [officielebekendmakingen.nl](http://officielebekendmakingen.nl), which provides public access to all publications of the Dutch parliament dated back to 1814. Searching on the website for the term ‘economic refugee’ yielded 134 transcripts from parliamentary debates from 1964 to 2021. This period spans the years from when the term ‘economic refugee’ was first used in parliamentary debates to when it was last used. This enables me to track the development of the term ‘economic refugee’ over time. There are a total of 186 paragraphs in which members of parliament use the term economic refugee.

### Method of analysis

The method taken to analyse the transcripts is critical discursive psychology (CDP) that focuses on the ‘action orientation’ of language (Edwards & Potter, 1992, p.2; Wetherell & Edley, 1999). What distinguishes ‘critical’ discursive psychology from discursive psychology is that the language is understood within broader social and political contexts rather than just within the language's immediate context (Wetherell, 1998). This characteristic of CDP overlaps with the critical discourse analysis (CDA) of van Dijk (2001). CDA is frequently used by scholars who examine migrant categories through a discursive approach (e.g., Yantseva, 2021; Rowe and O’Brien, 2014).

CDA is interested in the relationship between power and discourse (van Dijk, 2001). Simply put, if you control the discourse, you control people’s minds. As argued previously, how powerful actors categorise people on the move, shapes our understanding of those people (Jones, 2008, Kunz, 2020; De Coninck, 2020). Rather than dismissing this insight, this thesis expands on it by asking, ‘What is the purpose of wanting the mind to think like that?’

Because CDP is outside the cognitive framework (Goodman & Speer, 2007), CDP proves more suitable than CDA. Moreover, the primary emphasis on the action orientation of language and the concept of seeing language as a discursive resource to achieve some goal (Edwards, 1991, 1997), allows for a focus on the purpose of discursive use of ‘economic refugee’.

Based on the thoughts of scholars on the purpose of the migrant category mentioned above, I anticipate that the category is constructed so that it is action-oriented towards enabling exclusion – the goal. To accurately assess this, I consider how the category could be used to exclude people. I base this on poststructuralist insights about exclusionary language and discursive practices oriented towards exclusion (dichotomies and problematization). In the

section below, I develop this further and present the indicators and the coding scheme, which is visualised in figure 1.

### Illegitimacy

The first way to construct the ‘economic refugee’ oriented towards exclusion is to construct the economic refugee as an ‘illegitimate’ group. If the economic refugee is constructed in this manner, the legitimacy of people classified as 'economic refugees' to have legal status in the country is called into question, effectively delegitimizing the category of economic refugee. This will legitimise the group's exclusion, and thus in this way generate legitimacy for exclusionary politics and political agendas. Therefore, I analyse whether the category ‘economic refugee’ is constructed as illegitimate.

To indicate this, I code for every instance in which the economic refugee is positioned discursively in opposition to the group that embodies legitimacy. As different studies point out, binary constructions – for example, ‘genuine refugee’ versus ‘ungenuine refugees’ - determine who we think of as deserving our protection, i.e., who is welcome and who is not, and who should be excluded (Collyer, de Haas, 2012; Rowe & O'Brien, 2014; Sajjad, 2018; Crawley & Skleparis 2018; De Coninck, 2020; Dahinden, Fischer & Menet 2020). The economic category is expected to be constructed as the illegitimate group conceived as the ‘undeserving’ other in opposition to another group conceived as the ‘deserving’ other.

### Problematization

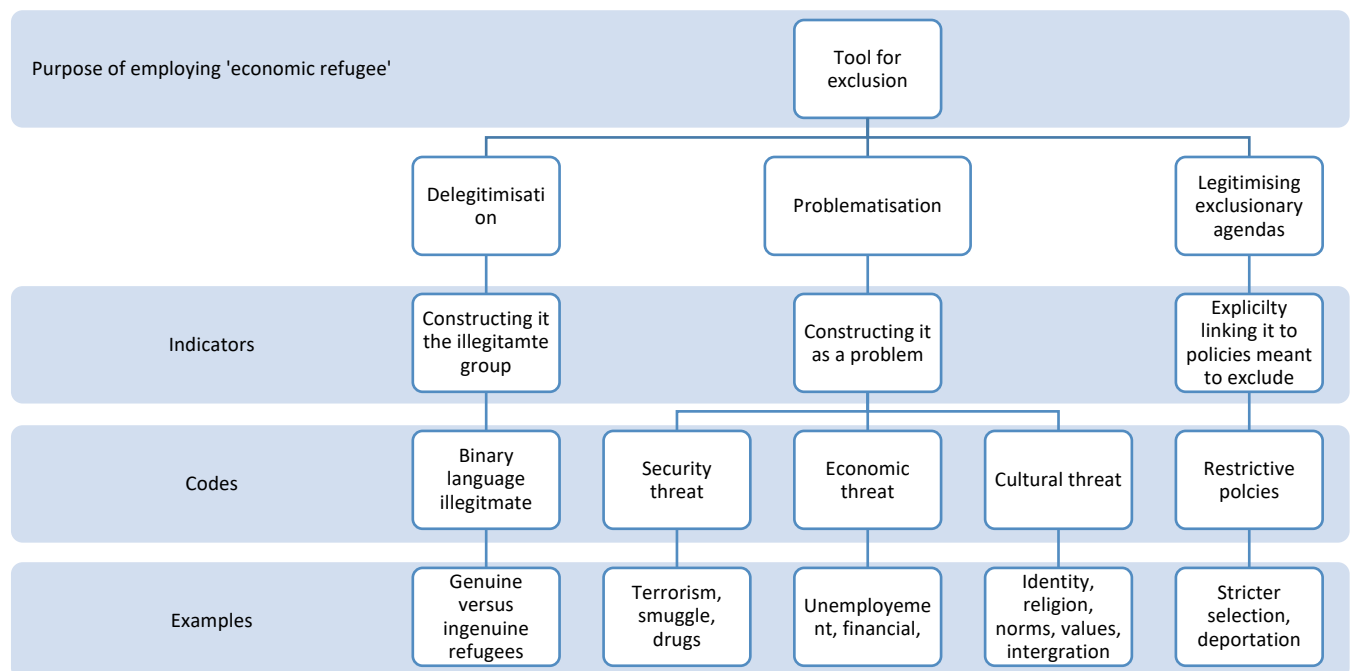
The second way to construct the ‘economic refugee’ oriented towards exclusion is to construct it as a problem that must be addressed (Schrover & Schinkel, 2013). If the 'economic refugee' is the subject of the problem, I anticipate that solutions will be devised to ‘get rid of the economic refugees’, implying restrictive policies that exclude those who fall into this category.

According to research, the discursive practice to problematise migration by framing is a threat (Rhodes 1997; Betts 2006; Bauder 2008; Schrover & Schinkel, 2013; Sajjad, 2018). Hence, to determine whether it is constructed as a problem, I will code for every instance when the ‘economic refugee’ is framed as a threat. to 1) the economy, 2) culture, and 3) security. This type of problematisations is the most frequently mentioned in the literature (Rhodes 1997; Betts 2006; Bauder 2008; Schrover & Schinkel, 2013; Sajjad, 2018). Any additional discursive strategies that contribute to problematisations will be coded inductively.

## Legitimise exclusionary policies and agendas

Apart from examining if the economic refugee's construction is action-oriented towards exclusion, I will also code for each instance in which the category is directly used to legitimise exclusionary policies and agendas. This is operationalised as restrictive policies that explicitly seek to exclude the 'economic refugee'. Examples can be found in figure 1.

Figure 1: Coding scheme



## Year & party

Apart from these three indicators, I also code the year it was deployed and by which party. Gathering data on the years enables tracking the historical development over time and to put it into context, which helps to gain a comprehensive understanding of the politics of the category.

Moreover, collecting data on the party type will allow for exploring how different parties use it. Given that such a category is expected to safeguard ideas around restricted immigration policies or other exclusionary matters, it is reasonable to expect a 'pro-immigration' to construct the category 'economic refugee' in a more inclusive way and to employ it for a different purpose than justifying exclusionary measures. I group the parties on 6 types: pro-migration (PSP, GroenLinks), left (Pvda, SP), centrum (D66), Christian (CDA, CU, RPF, SGP), right (VVD), anti-migration (PVV, FvD, 50plus).

# ANALYSIS

The findings are organised into three major sections. The first section discussed the emergence of the category ‘economic refugee’ from 1964 to 2020. The second section lays out the construction of the economic refugee, first by focusing on the delegitimisation of the ‘economic refugee’ and then on the problematisation of the ‘economic refugee’. The third section discusses how the ‘economic refugee’ was used to justify exclusionary politics, and additionally used for advocating international development politics. The final section discusses pro-migration parties’ ambiguous use of the category.

## The emergence of the economic refugee

To understand the emergence of the category and the purpose of creating this subcategory, this section presents the results on an aggregate level year-by-year basis to contextualise the political goal of creating the ‘economic refugee’, preceded by a discussion on the initial emergence of the term in the parliamentary debate.

The frequency of the deployment of the term ‘economic refugee’ in parliamentary debates on a year-by-year basis is represented in figure 2. The development of the category ‘economic refugee’ is depicted in figure 3. Together these figures show that there are two distinct periods: The first period (1964-1985), the term was scarcely used (figure 2) and when it was, it was used to reject the category (figure 3, y-as 1). In the second period (1985-present), the category was frequently used (figure 2), and it was being delegitimised and problematised. Additionally, the category was frequently used (62) to legitimise restrictive policies (table 1). I'll go into greater detail about this shift below.

Table 1: frequency of main indicators

Main indicators	Frequency
Delegitimisation	63
Problematisation	49
Exclusionary practices	62

Figure 2: Frequency of the deployment of the term 'economic refugee' on a year by year basis

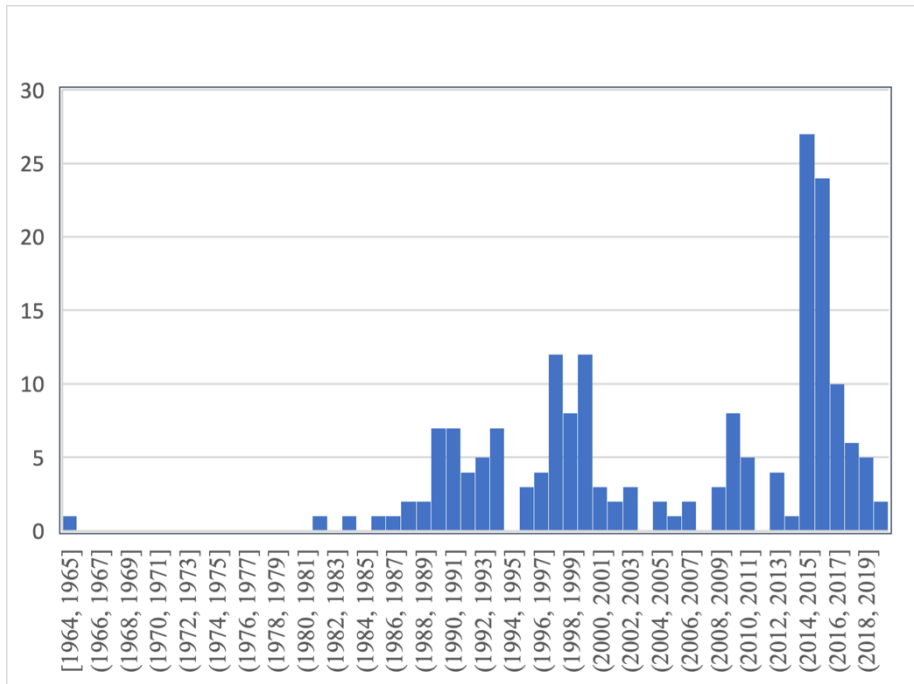
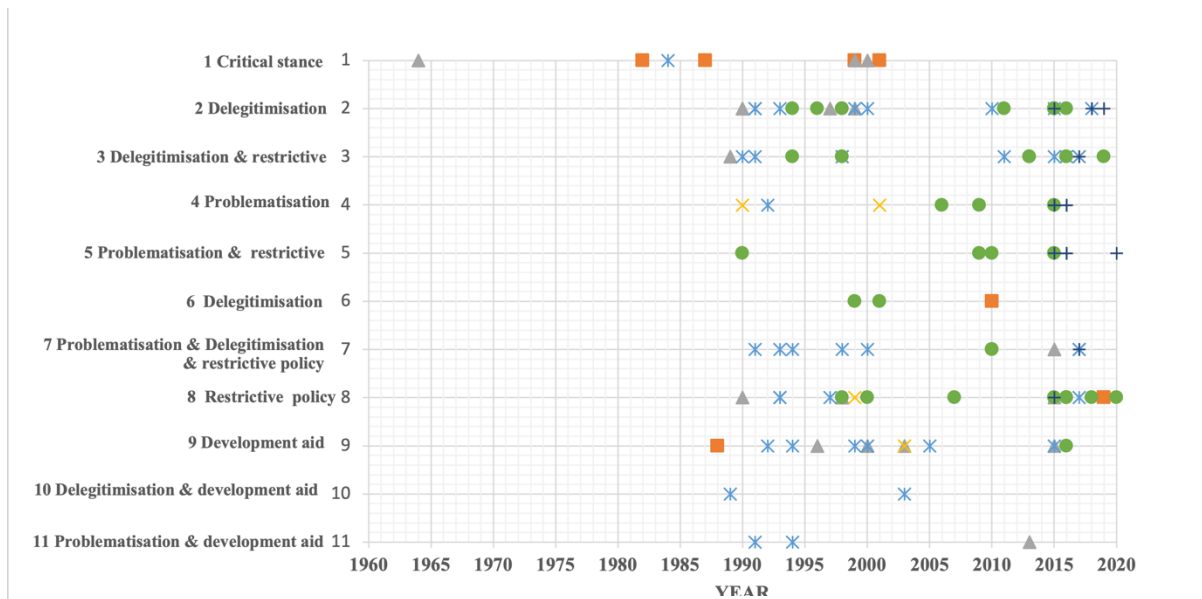


Figure 2: The discursive development of 'economic refugee' on years, differentiated by party group.



Note:

Y-as exist of groups of coding, which need to be interpreted as nominal.

Each label on y-as means that the only that indicator (label) was identified within the statement, and not another code.

It doesn't represent frequency.

### First period (1964-1985)

The term ‘economic refugee’ first appeared in the Dutch parliamentary debate in 1964 by Van der Stoel, a PvdA member. He said:

*‘We have received reports that Austria's attitude towards asylum for refugees has changed. This would surprise us somewhat because Austria has a very good reputation on this point. Is Austria perhaps making a distinction between so-called political and so-called economic refugees?’* (p. 744).

In this statement, he rejects making distinctions between the types of refugees, as he implicitly claims that making distinctions will not mirror Austria's good reputation towards asylum for refugees. After this use, the term ‘economic refugee’ was not deployed within parliamentary debates for an extended period following that (see figure 2.). In the early ‘80s, the term reappeared when pro-migration parties used the term ‘economic refugee’ to criticise how politicians portrayed people on the move<sup>1</sup>. In short, the first usage of the category ‘economic refugee’ within parliamentary debates was not in an abusive sense, but more in a critical sense, rejecting the existence of the category ‘economic refugee’.

### Second period (1985-now)

This, however, began to change in the late ‘80s. Resistance to the category ‘economic refugee’ had faded (Figure 3, y-as 1), and members of parliament (MPs) from all parties had begun to explicitly construct the economic refugee as illegitimate and as a problem (Figure 3). To gain a better understanding of this turning point in the late ‘80s, I'll briefly outline the broader context.

In the late ‘80s, the number of asylum applications in the Netherlands increased by a factor of 18: There were 754 asylum applications in 1981, and in 1871 13,460. In 1984, tens of thousands of Tamils arrived. The Tamils, who were Hindus persecuted by Buddhists, were the first large group to ask for asylum in the Netherlands. They were markedly different from the people who asked for asylum in previous decades (Walaardt, 2012). Asylum migration was no longer a strictly east-west phenomenon, as the number of people who were migrating from the south to the north increased. Moreover, the east-west movement increased with the

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<sup>1</sup> However, I discovered no precedent for such use in parliamentary records, implying that these politicians may have used it outside the parliamentary debate.



breakdown of the iron curtain in the early '90s (Walaardt, 2021). These new population movements could explain the notable change in the discursive context around the end of '80s, as represented in figures 2 and 3.

During this period, the study reveals that the category 'economic refugee' was created as a result of the distinction between two types of refugees: political refugees and economic refugees. Throughout the parliamentary debate, MPs emphasised the importance of distinguishing between these two categories in order to manage the immigration flow, as illustrated by the following statement:

*'Large-scale population movements are currently taking place from east to West and from South to north. The expectations in this regard are not very optimistic. Dutch policy is aimed at keeping the migrant flow manageable and controllable. To this end, it is desirable to distinguish between economic and political refugees'* (Scheltema, D66, 1999, p.9).

Going back to figure 2, we see a decline in use around 2000. Around this time there was a new, more restrictive asylum policy (Wallaardt, 2021). The analysis reveals that the MPs framed this new asylum policy as a means of eliminating the category of economic refugee: *'The very purpose of the asylum procedure is to separate those political refugees from the economic refugees. That is also what the new Asylum Act is designed for'* (Hoekema, D66, 2000, p.9). Moreover, around 2015 there is an increase in the category's usage (see figure 2) which can be explained by the increase in population flow in Europe during that time, named 'the European migration crisis' (Buonanno, 2017, p. 106),

By situating the discursive setting within the larger social-political context, I conclude that the category of 'economic refugee' is an outcome of the 'productive aspects of discourses' (Schrover & Schinkel, 2013, p.1124), oriented towards practices of 'managing' immigration inflow, or more precisely, decreasing the inflow.

#### **The construction of the economic refugee.**

To examine if the category economic refugee is used as a tool for exclusion, I have argued that the construction should be action-oriented towards exclusion. To analyse if this was the case, I used the two main indicators: delegitimation and problematization.

### Delegitimisation

As shown in Table 1 y-as, the 'economic refugee' began to be constructed as illegitimate in 1986 and has continued to be constructed in this manner ever since. I have determined this using the following indicator: binary language (real versus fake).

In the late 1980s, MPs began to construct economic refugees as the opposite of 'real' refugees, which resulted in the existence of two separate categories, one is legitimate and one who illegitimate, thereby enforcing the dichotomous construction of legitimacy. The binary category 'real refugee' versus 'economic refugee' has been identified 63 times (See table 1). For example, Van Der Berg (SGP) who said that *'(..) to be able to stem the flow of economic refugees into our country, without impeding access to our country for the real refugee, the real asylum seeker. They are welcome, and they should remain welcome'* (1994, p.4846). In this statement, a binary is established between the real refugee who is welcomed and the 'economic refugees' who are not, thereby hierarchising 'welcomeness' and constructing the economic refugee as the 'undeserving' other in contrast to another group conceived as the 'deserving' other (the real refugee).

Additionally, the analysis reveals that this binary sparked a dynamic in which the 'economic refugee' was further delegitimised and oriented towards exclusion as a result of its 'fakeness'. One such discursive strategy is depicting the economic refugee as immoral. In another statement, Van Der Berg, builds upon the dichotomy construction of real refugee versus economic refugee, effectively labelling the 'economic refugee' as 'pseudo-refugee' and then demoralise the 'economic refugee';

*'A strict policy towards the so-called economic refugees is urgently needed. This does not conflict with a just humane policy but is in our view, a precondition for it. Every place that is taken by a pseudo-refugee -I call it that- is at the expense of a place for a real refugee, who fears persecution'* (1991, p.6026).

In this statement, van der Berg contributes to the Othering of the economic refugee by erecting a dichotomy between him and the economic refugee: creating the impression that 'his' good intentions are being thwarted by economic refugees, who immorally occupy the spots of those who truly need it. Due to the immoral Other, he is being impeded to act on his moral convictions, that is, to help the 'real' refugees. He moralises himself while demoralising the

economic refugee. Furthermore, he legitimises a strict policy towards economic refugees by framing it as a requirement for a 'just, humane policy'. On the grounds that economic refugees are not real refugees; hence, they do not deserve asylum and their admission disadvantages genuine refugees. As a result, a strict policy towards economic refugees is required to ensure that real refugees have a place.

Another discursive practice - logically derived from the discursive construction of economic refugee being the fake refugee - is to construct the economic refugee as a liar. For example, Hiddema (FVD) stated that '*the majority of all refugee stories are lies and deception. We are being tricked. They are not real refugees. They are economic refugees*' (2019, p.33). This statement creates the impression that economic refugees are lying, which reinforces the notion that these are fake refugees. Additionally, he implies that because they are fake refugees, the ones who have gained asylum have lied.

Altogether, these discursive strategies which delegitimise the 'economic refugee' by using binaries are all action-oriented towards legitimising the exclusion of people on the move who are top-down categorised as 'economic refugees'.

### Problematization

Another discursive strategy that is action-oriented towards exclusion is to problematise the economic refugee. The analysis revealed that during the parliamentary debates, the economic refugee was constructed as a problem-subject. To identify this, I used three indicators: culture threat, economic threat, and security threat. Additional problematization-related themes emerged (see table 2 below). Interestingly, these coded themes and the emerging themes differ in the field of problematization and to whom the economic refugee constitutes a problem. Economic, cultural, and security threats are linked to society and are directed at Dutch citizens, whereas the capacity threat and decline in support are linked with the 'borders' of society and directed at the 'true' refugee. Both discursive practices share the trait of being action-oriented towards legitimising exclusion. Below I will go more into detail.

Table 4: frequency of subcategories of ‘problematization’ with examples

<i>Deductive themes</i>	<i>Frequency</i>
<b>Economical threat</b>	9
<b>Cultural threat</b>	7
<b>Endangering/ security threat</b>	11
<b><i>Inductive themes</i></b>	
<b>Capacity threat</b>	14
<b>Xenophobia/decreased support</b>	6

Field of problematization within the society

First, the economic refugee is discursively constructed as an economic threat. For example, Blaauw (VVD) brought to bear problems of the labour market upon the economic refugee: ‘*It should also be noted that these refugees, in fact, only serve to increase the unemployment rate*’ (1986, p.9). Or that they cost much: ‘*We have to remember that economic refugees only cost money. That is all paid for with tax money coughed up by Dutch taxpayers. We are just going to succumb to the burden that is coming*’ (Faber-van de Klashorst, PVV, 2015, p.6).

Moreover, the economic refugee is framed as a cultural threat. For example, the economic refugee is framed as impeding the social cohesion: ‘*influx of economic refugees (...) also has a negative effect on integration*’ (Ravenstein, D66, 2001, p.702). Or by framing that economic refugees are a threat to the Dutch identity: ‘*They are received in asylum seekers’ centres where they already start their terrorist activities: the harassment and abuse of Christians, homosexuals and other vulnerable people*’ (Faber-van de Klashorst, PVV, 2016, p.8). In this statement, Van der Klashorst claims that the economic refugee harasses ‘Christians’ and ‘homosexuals’, producing the image that that ‘they’ do not share ‘our’ norms.

Here, van de Klashorst, participates in the process of Othering, implying that ‘they’ threaten our Dutch-Christian identity.

Lastly, the economic refugee is also framed as a security threat. As Faber-van de Klashorst (PVV) also stated:

*‘Meanwhile, our borders are wide open. Billions of economic refugees are ramming at the gates of Europe. This huge uncontrolled flow of migrants is not only disrupting Western society financially and socially but also has terrorists in its wake. Their goal is to create as much chaos as possible in the free West’* (2016, p.8).

By employing language such as ‘billions’, ‘disruptions’, ‘huge uncontrolled flow’, ‘chaos’, ‘terrorist’, ‘harassment’, and ‘abuse’, this discourse instils fear and creates a reality in which our safety is threatened. Another example of producing the dangerous ‘Other’ is Dijkstal (VVD), who suggests that the group of economic refugees consists of people *‘who are trying to gain entry to the Netherlands through the asylum procedure in order to engage in criminal activities here especially now focused on terrorism’* (2001, p.92). Again, linking the economic refugee with terrorism.

#### Field of problematisation at the borders of the society

The field of problematisation is not only limited within the society but also extended to the borders of society. The ‘economic refugee’ is problematised as pressuring the capacity, which creates a sense of fear that the capacity will explode and that the society will be flooded with people, as illustrated by a den Berg (SGP): *‘Due to the rapidly growing flow of this category, our national system for the reception of asylum seekers is in danger of becoming bogged down in complete chaos’* (1994, p. 4846). This capacity topos is also used by other MPs to argue that economic refugees limit the capacity to receive ‘real refugees’. Here, the problem is explicitly directed towards the ‘real refugee’ instead of the Dutch citizen, for example: *‘The additional disadvantage of accepting these refugees under these circumstances is that those who wish or must leave their country for political or religious reasons hardly have a chance to be included’* (Blaauw, VVD, 1986, p.9)

Another way that the ‘economic refugee’ poses a problem for the ‘real refugee’ is by claiming they decrease the support for ‘real’ refugees: *‘The influx of economic refugees (...) erodes support for asylum policy’* (Ravestein, D66, 2001, p.703). Similarly done by a member

of a pro-migration party (GroenLinks): *'If you want to maintain support for real refugees, you have to keep out the economic refugees'* (Dibi, 2010, p.11).

We can understand these types of problematisations within the broader delegitimising discourse of the economic refugee as being the fake refugee who is not in need while simultaneously occupying the room intended for those who are. First, this shows how delegitimation and problematisation directly reinforce each other towards the aim of exclusion. Second, these discursive practices garner broader support in that they also appeal to the more pro-refugee camp, as economic refugees pose a problem for genuine refugees.

To summarise, the analysis found that the construction of the economic refugee was predicated upon language oriented towards exclusion. Delegitimation as well as problematisation was prevalent during the debate: the economic refugee is the fake, immoral refugee who lies and constitutes the Dangerous Other, both for the Dutch citizens as for the 'real' refugee. In short, the analyses have found that the language that discursively formed the economic refugee is action-oriented towards exclusion.

### Legitimising exclusionary agenda's

I have argued that delegitimising and problematising the category is action-oriented towards legitimising exclusionary policies and political agendas. The restrictive policies aimed at excluding the category are illustrated in Table 3. However, the construction was also utilised to justify pro-development policies.

*Table 2: Frequency of legitimising policies*

<b>Restrictive policy</b>	<b>Frequency</b>
Stricter asylum policy	35
Deportation	19
Shelter in own region	6
Border control	3
Close borders	1
<b>Additional policy area</b>	<b>Frequency</b>
International	20

### Restrictive policy

Stricter asylum policy, deportation, shelter in one's own region, closing borders (table 3) – these measures were all justified by the construction of the economic refugee as being illegitimate, a problem or both (figure 3, y-as 5,6,7).

Additionally, as illustrated in figure 3, y-as 8, there are instances where the economic refugee category was not explicitly delegitimised nor problematised but was nonetheless used to justify restrictive policies. It is primarily in this regard that we can argue that the economic refugee serves as a discourse resource to justify restrictive policies. In the following statement, Hoekema (D66) argues for a strict visa policy by deploying the category economic refugee: *'It is of no use to anyone if the tourist visa offers a disguised entrance to the Netherlands for economic refugees'* (1999, p.2427).

### Development aid

The analysis, however, reveals that the dominant construction was also used to justify pro-development policies. Rouvoet (RPF), for example, argues for an increase in the budget for development assistance during the debate over the Development Cooperation Budget and demands for a revision of the VVD's strict stance on this issue:

*'I would like to say to the VVD Group that it is important to have an eye for the coherence of things: it does not make sense to keep exerting downward pressure on development aid and at the same time to call, more or less every other day, for a stricter policy with regard to economic refugees. That is like mopping up the water while continuing to open the tap'* (1994, p.1704).

This statement reflects that the term 'economic refugee' became a topic for arguing the case for development assistance. Hence, the category is also used for justifying pro-development aid. Almost all parties engaged in this practice (except for anti-migration parties).

However, it is important to realise that the 'economic refugee' could also be used to justify pro-development policies only because of the construction of the economic refugee. In other words, the exclusionary language on which the category is based allows for its use.

Moreover, those who use it to justify development aid perpetuate in the discourse that these (fictitious) masses of people are undesirable and pose a problem that must be addressed by pushing these people away far from the borders. Hence by using the category, the construction is being reproduced. Since it is equally applicable to this policy, the term ‘economic refugee’ has been used and reused, which normalises the category and establishes it as a term in people’s vocabulary.

### Where are the alternative voices?

The pro-migration parties also use the category ‘economic refugee’ as a discursive recourse to demand an increase in the budget. For example, van ES when she argued the climate should also be incorporated in development policies, because ‘*The U.S. WorldWatch Institute predicts that the number of environmental refugees now estimated at 10 million in the coming decades will exceed the number of economic refugees*’ (van Es, PSP 1988, p.1714). While she initially rejected the category, in this statement she uses it to argue for a more expanded development policy by implying that the new type of refugees will outnumber economic refugees, thereby firstly implying that the category exists in the real world, secondly producing the image of the present of large number of economic refugees and lastly contributing to the discourse on economic refugees as problematic.

Although pro-migration parties were not as prominent in the debates as the other parties, the analysis reveals that they rejected the category ‘economic refugee’, but also participated and reproduced the construction of ‘economic refugee’ embedded in exclusionary language (see figure 3; orange square). As a result, the term ‘economic refugee’ used by pro-migration parties remains ambiguous. They reject the category while simultaneously using it as a discursive recourse to advocate for development policies, effectively ‘abusing’ the term to advance their own agenda.

The absence of dissenting voices or alternative constructions of the category, as well as its ability to advance a more leftist agenda, may account for the term's widespread use, elevating it to the status of a natural or ‘taken-for-granted’ category. Additionally, Kunz's (2020) observation that ‘it can be difficult to break out of the bind of categories that discursively produce the world in a particular way’ (p.2155). By uncritically adopting the category, you are, albeit unintentionally, reproducing this world: the world of masses of fake, dangerous refugees who cause problems for society and the ‘real’ refugees.



## CONCLUSION

Around the turn of the twentieth century, poststructuralist thought began to influence the social sciences about the relationship between power and language. The notion that the use of language reflects important meaning has gradually permeated the academic field of migration studies, questioning and deconstructing commonly used terms such as ‘refugee’ or ‘migrant’. This made significant contributions to our understanding of migrant categories and terminology, posing critical questions and motivating scholars and students to adopt reflexivity in the use of these terms in the academic arena. It specifically addresses that these categories are not objective representations but are embedded in political language. However, less attention has been paid on the purpose of politicians to use these categories in the political arena. The present thesis, therefore, examines the purpose of using discursively the ‘economic refugee’ in the political arena. Doing so, this thesis also furthers the theoretical understanding of the political objectives of the productions of migrant categories and how migrant categories are sites for exclusionary politics.

To answer the question ‘What purpose does the category ‘economic refugee’ serve in Dutch political discourse?’, this thesis performed a discursive analysis of 186 extracts from Dutch parliamentary debates in a timeframe that is determined by its first (1968) and its last use (2020). This thesis argues that the purpose of politicians using the category in the political arena is to legitimise and gain support for exclusionary policies and political agendas. This became evident not only by the finding that it is directly deployed to argue for the exclusion of this group in the form of restrictive exclusionary policies, but also because the construction of the economic refugee is predicated upon exclusionary language, oriented towards the exclusion: the economic refugee is the fake dangerous refugee, which makes it possible that the category could be employed as a strategic vehicle to demand restrictive policies in the first place. While it was not always used directly to legitimise restrictive policies, it can still be considered a tool for exclusion, as it was still built on language geared towards exclusion when used for pro-development policies.

Therefore, this thesis reinforces the theory that migrant categories are sites for exclusionary politics. According to scholars, migrant categories serve to distinguish between those who are legitimate and those who are illegitimate for gaining legal standing within the country (i.e., who should be included and who should be excluded) (Collyer, de Haas, 2012; Sajjad, 2018; Crawley & Skleparis, 2018; De Coninck, 2020; Dahinden, Fischer, & Menet

2021). This thesis has provided evidence that the category is used to legitimise the exclusion.

While this thesis contributes to the knowledge of the politics of categories in connection to exclusionary practices, a more detailed understanding is still needed. The discursive approach taken to analysing this relationship is insufficient to appreciate the extent to which categories enable exclusion in practice, aside from legitimisation. While this thesis shows that politicians employ this category to legitimise exclusion in the political arena, it ignores all other actors involved in the asylum procedure. In the end, the asylum procedure is a lengthy and bureaucratic one that involves civil servants, advocates, lawyers, non-governmental organisations, and other actors who shape whether or not someone grants asylum. A research-based interview examining the role of rigid categories in this decision could contribute to a more practical understanding of the relationship between categories and exclusion.

Second, this thesis argues that the broader purpose of the category 'economic refugee' in particular - and the phenomenon of 'categorical fetishism' in general - is best understood within the context of migration governance, which is intrinsically tied to categorisation. While the collected data is limited to Dutch parliamentary debates and thus insufficient to conduct a thorough genealogical analysis of the category 'economic refugee', the analysis discovered that the creation of the sub-migrant category 'economic refugee' is instrumental in achieving the political goal of 'managing' migration. As such, categories are an integral part of the nation-states' migration control apparatus (Becker, 2014), which relates to Foucault's (2004) insight into new modes of governance and knowledge production. This reinforces the understanding of categorisation in terms of immigration governance and management (Hess, 2012; Becker, 2014; Sajjad, 2018; Janmyr & Mourad, 2018). Importantly, migrant categories should not be seen objectively as they are tied to a political agenda (Castles, 2000). Given that migrant categories serve as political instruments and venues for exclusionary politics, remaining uncritically within their bounds appears unpromising. In light of the findings on pro-migration parties' uncritical use of the term 'economic refugee', it becomes evident how crucial it is for the debate on migrant categories to take place not only in the academic realm, but also in the public realm.

Third, this thesis adds a more nuanced insight to the debate on the relationship between migrant categorisation and the legitimisation of inhumane practices. The potential that the category 'economic refugee' is used to legitimise exclusionary practice in particular - is not derived from the category itself but derived from the construction of the category. This means that the 'economic refugee' could only be employed to justify restrictive policies because the

people on the move were being objectified, legitimised, and problematised - and as such, dehumanised. This is important because it informs us of the ethical relation we have with the Other: only by the act of dehumanising the Other we are able to accept inhumane practices towards the Other. This leads me to the last point I want to make: the implication this has for the field of critical migration studies. Scholars of critical migration studies are committed to combating human rights violations, racism, exclusion, and oppression. The same holds true for me and other scholars who study migration categories. However, I believe that we should go beyond challenging migration categories. If we genuinely want to combat inhumane practices through research, we should establish a new field of migration studies dedicated to reintroducing humans into the migration debate. We should and could combat the objectification in the political, public, and academic spheres by concentrating on ways to bring the subject back into the objectified people on the move. Failure to do so is tantalising the practice of the dehumanisation of individuals, which serves to normalise and legitimise inhumane practices towards those who are dehumanised. Scholars who are concerned about inhumane treatment of individuals should engage with the project of bringing the human back to the 'migrant'.

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