

# GAPS

Decentring the Study of Migrant  
Returns and Return Policies

Concept note

## Anthropology of Return Migration

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**Abstract**

This review paper outlines the history of anthropological research on return migration, first as a 'natural' homecoming experience and then in terms of more critical work on forced return and refugee return. The paper progresses from a focus on anthropology as a disciplinary approach to address interdisciplinary work (including anthropologists, sociologists, cultural theorists, and scholars from other related fields) that has contributed to the study of return governance, voluntariness, deportation, and re-migration.

**Anthropology of Migration and Return**

Early anthropologists ignored the study of migration because it did not fit with their notion of timeless and bounded cultures (Brettell 2003). In particular, return migration was not seen as worthy of study in anthropology and other disciplines, leading it to be called 'the great unwritten chapter in the history of migration' (King 2000, p. 7). Returning home was assumed to be the unproblematic reinsertion of the migrant into the original society – or it was believed that immigrants would never return. Noticing that many migrants intended to return but did not, anthropologists focused on the 'myth of return' (Al-Rasheed 1994; Anwar 1979; Dahya 1973; Zetter 1994; 1999), the 'return illusion' (Brettell 1979), or the 'ideology of return' (Rubenstein 1979). Anthropologists in the emerging field of diaspora studies in the 1990s emphasised the persistent presence of home as a symbolic resource while actual return to the mythic home remained strangely unexplored (cf. Clifford 1997; Tololyan 1991). In fact, return migration clashed with dominant narratives of assimilation, multiculturalism, and transnationalism that delineate the history of migration research (Stefansson 2004, p. 5).

Anthropologists first discussed return migration in a 1979 series on the topic in the *Papers in Anthropology* series (Rhoades 1979). This was followed by an *Annual Review of Anthropology* article in which return migration was defined as 'the movement of emigrants back to their homelands to resettle' (Gmelch 1980). Although the review's author, George Gmelch (1992), later published a book on the subject of Caribbean returnees, return migration remained a neglected topic. When transnationalism became a hot trend in the discipline in the 1990s, scholars started focusing on the ties that immigrants maintain with their countries of origin such as remittances, construction of homes, and participation in politics and cultural and social activities (Brettell 2003; Basch et al. 1994; Foner 1997; Glick Schiller et al. 1995; 1992; Kearney 1995; 2005). Ironically, in their focus on sending and receiving countries as a single transnational field, return migration rarely became a distinct topic of study. Return home was seen as a brief intersection in a 'transnational migration circuit' (Rouse 1991, p. 14). Furthermore, immigrants who returned permanently were considered 'temporary migrants' and therefore less worthy of study than permanently transnational migrants.

In the 2000s, return migration finally began to receive scholarly (and anthropological) attention with edited volumes (Conway and Potter 2009; Markowitz and Stefansson 2004; Al-Ali and Koser 2002; Long and Oxfeld 2004) and in-depth ethnographies, including studies of long distance nationalism for Haitian-Americans (Glick Schiller and Fouron 2001), consumption practices of Moroccan-Italians (Salih 2003), home and belonging for British-born Cypriots (Teerling 2014), Greek returnees' emergence as a 'counter-diaspora' (King and Christou 2014), Mexican-Americans' reintegration efforts (Rothstein 2016), highly educated Somali returnees' nation-building struggles (Galipo 2019), Bulgarian-Turks' partial

ethnic inclusion (Parla 2019), and German-Turks' ethical predicaments in their homelands (Rottmann 2019). At this time and in subsequent years, there was a lot of overlap with sociologists, geographers, and others. For example, in the volume edited by Anghel, Fauser, and Boccagni (2019), researchers reported on in-depth studies with ethnic Germans 'returning' to Romania's Transylvania region, workers from Libya and Ivory Coast to Ghana, and German-speaking returnees in Turkey and Romania among others.

### **Concept of Return Migration**

In the initial approaches to return migration within anthropology, return migration as a concept or process was largely a neutral, descriptive term, aligning with the official EU definition: 'The movement of a person going from a host country back to a country of origin, country of nationality or usual residence usually after spending a significant period of time in the host country whether voluntary or forced, assisted or spontaneous'.<sup>1</sup> Yet, such a definition of the term 'return migration' is, in fact, problematic (King 2000): return is construed as natural, as a teleological move of migrants back to the place 'where they truly belong'. Researchers have shown over and over again that such a simplistic definition does not reflect the reality of return migration for several reasons.

First, many migrants do not simply go to one country and return to their origin country permanently. Scholars tried to develop typologies of returns based on temporality and intention. One attempt identified three types: returns as one-time occurrences ending migration trajectories; returns as repeated occurrences; and returns as part of a continuing migratory process (Tsuda 2019). Another typology identified four types of return: occasional and short-term visits to see kin and friends; seasonal returns; temporary returns of a longer duration and with the intention to remigrate; and finally permanent returns, including resettlement (King 2000). All such typologies run into the same problem: the subjects of ethnographic research rarely fit neatly into any one typology. Migration experiences are multilocal; migrants may feel a 'belonging' to two or more places, not just to their 'home' country. Typologies further fail to focus on how intentions might change during the migration process (Kuschminder 2017, p. 7), and scholars have demonstrated that migrants' ideas are affected by movement through life, not merely between places (Olwig 1998). A second – and related – issue with defining return migration is with the labelling of any migrant as a 'returnee'. In some studies, migrants happily take up this label, but in others they do not refer to themselves or even think of themselves as 'return migrants' (Rottmann 2019). Furthermore, there are many cases where there can be no true 'return' to the status quo. For example, countries, regions, cities, and individuals can change drastically, making the notion of return or homecoming essentially meaningless. On the other hand, the most extreme kind of permanent return is probably the return upon death (Abu-Lughod 2011; Pauli and Bedorf 2018; Stefansson 2004).

A major finding for scholars studying return is that it is challenging for the migrants, who often face difficulties or impossible homecomings, resulting in ambivalence, ambiguity, misunderstandings, and disenchantment (Stefansson 2004; Gmelch 1992; Tsuda 2003;

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<sup>1</sup> [https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/networks/european-migration-network-emn/emn-asylum-and-migration-glossary/glossary/return\\_en](https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/networks/european-migration-network-emn/emn-asylum-and-migration-glossary/glossary/return_en)

Huseby-Darvas 2004). Yet while they identify numerous spatial and social challenges – for example, research focused on conflicts in neighbourhoods, schools, and public spheres for German-Turkish return migrants (Rottmann 2013; 2015; 2018) – researchers also find joy, satisfaction, connection, and successful reintegration (Rottmann 2019). The study of return migration has provided a particularly fertile ground for anthropologists to explore concepts of ‘home’ and ‘belonging’ as places of tension between multiple forms of inclusion and exclusion (Brun and Fabos 2015; Olwig 2012; Parla 2019; Rottmann 2019).

### **Anthropology of Refugee Returns**

The majority of early studies of return migration in anthropology were not focused on refugee, asylum seeker, or irregular migrant return. It was only in the 1980s that anthropologists started to study refugees, with the publication of ethnographies like Peter Loizos’s *The Heart Grown Bitter* (1981) about Cypriot war refugees and B. E. Harrell-Bond’s *Imposing Aid: Emergency Assistance to Refugees* (1986) about Ugandan refugees. As with other studies of migration that overlooked return migration at the time, the anthropological works that followed focused on the experiences of internally displaced people in camps and resettled refugees in countries of asylum (Gilad 1990; Habarad 1987; Hirshon 1989; Peteet 1995). Actually, a failure to focus on refugee return among resettled refugees aligns with research showing that numbers of refugee returnees are low among resettled refugees, even when socio-political conditions improve (Zetter 2021). Refugee return, when it did happen, was initially viewed by anthropologists as a type of ‘ethnic return migration’, or ‘post-colonial return’ (Stefansson 2004, p. 7), ‘roots migration’ (Wessendorf 2007), or ‘ancestral return’ (Teerling 2014). For example, anthropologists and others studied diasporic returns (returns of exile communities), exploring notions of homeland and ‘right of return’, or the ‘myth of return’ for displaced populations like Armenians, Palestinians, Middle Eastern Christians, and so on (Adelman and Barkan, 2011; Chatty, 2010; Al-Rasheed 1994; Baser and Toivanen, 2019).

As with other studies of returnees, researchers stressed the social, psychological, economic, and political complexities of return for refugees, even when the return itself was largely (or largely perceived to be) the free choice of the migrant (Barnes 2001; Black and Koser 1999; Hammond 2004; Muggeridge and Doná 2006; Long and Oxfeld 2004). Anthropologists joined other scholars, mainly sociologists and political scientists, in trying to understand structural incentives for return, such as access to services and employment opportunities in receiving countries, security, and possibilities of property restitution in origin countries (Rottmann and Kaya 2021), asset ownership, access to education (Al Husein and Wagner 2020) and living conditions, and legal status (Valenta et al. 2020). A few studies also looked at more emotional or ‘affective’ dimensions of return decisions (Perez Murcia, 2019).

### **The New Governance of Return Migration: Anthropological and Sociological Approaches**

The last decade-and-a-half heralded a radical change in how the return migration of refugees, asylum seekers, and irregular migrants is conceived both within and beyond anthropology, as States have developed new concepts, tools, and methods focused on return. Rather than based mainly on seeking one’s ‘roots’ or an ‘ancestral home’, the meaning of return migration is highly politicised. Return now meets an objective of receiving States that consider it the ‘optimum durable solution’ to refugee-hosting. In the EU, Member states (MSs) are frequently less focused on the successful integration of migrants than on swift returns, making return a

main strategy pursued by UNHCR and other intergovernmental organisations as well as governments (Long 2013; Hammond 2014). Voluntary return and repatriation – ‘the assisted or independent return to the country of origin, transit, or third country, based on the free will of the returnee’<sup>2</sup> – is prioritised in the EU’s return policies. MSs must enable third-country nationals subject to a return decision to leave the EU territory voluntarily by granting them a voluntary departure period (Article 7 Return Directive). With this new ‘regime of return’ in the political and legal sphere, return is positioned as something natural for States (if not also for citizens) – a process that restores the Westphalian order of the State-citizen bond to a defined territory (Shacknove 1985).

Researchers – and especially anthropologists – have long criticised the common-sense link between peoples and territories (Clifford 1997; Gupta and Ferguson 1992; Malkki 1995; Parent 2022), and thus are highly critical of any policies that posit a naturalness to return of migrants. For example, writing about refugee repatriation to Ethiopia, Lorie Hammond (2004, p. 79) challenges the ‘*assumption* that place plays a particular, generalizable, and predictable kind of role in community construction and identity formation across cultures’ [emphasis in the original]. Ethnographic work among Palestinian youth in a refugee camp in Beirut has shown disillusionment with the ‘Right to Return’ movement and ‘identities rooted in a purely nationalist discourse’ (Allan 2014). On the other hand, we cannot assume that refugees have no relation to places at all and are in a permanent state of liminality (Brun and Fábos 2015; Ramsay 2019). In fact, strong connections to places can be an important locus of migrant agency and identity. Dawn Chatty’s (2010) ethnography of Armenian, Christian, Kurdish, and Palestinian migrants points to the central importance of place – and multiple identities – as part of constructing welcoming cosmopolitanism across the Middle East. Writing about ‘the jungle’ encampment at Calais, France, Michel Agier (2018) posits that it is a space of vibrant creativity for migrants – far from meaningless, even though it is a challenging home. Thus, we must guard against common-sense notions of an essential national belonging or a solidified place-based identity and allow fine-grained ethnographies to lead the way to understanding the meaning of places for migrants.

### **Voluntariness of return, deportation, and assisted voluntary return**

Today, the borders between anthropology and related fields are nearly unrecognisable. Most social scientists are highly sceptical of the widely-used term ‘voluntary return’ and accompanying new regimes of border security and deportation (Andersson 2016; De Genova et al. 2022; Drotbohm and Hasselberg 2017). Research shows that although supposedly premised on the free will of the migrant, ‘voluntary return’ is in practice often dominated by State coercion, social destitution, structural violence, and abuse (De Genova et al. 2022, p. 856).

The contradictions between agency and governance emerge quite clearly in the classification of ‘**voluntary return migrants**’ by governments or international organisations. Some migrants may only be ‘willing’ to return because they either have no access to social amenities and shelter or they risk imprisonment, violence, and other abuse

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<sup>2</sup> [https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/networks/european-migration-network-emn/emn-asylum-and-migration-glossary/glossary/voluntary-return\\_en](https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/networks/european-migration-network-emn/emn-asylum-and-migration-glossary/glossary/voluntary-return_en)

(such as separation from their children) in destination countries (de Haas 2021). Thus, their return is not based on a real, intrinsic desire to do so. Under such situations of extreme distress and pressure, migrants who ‘decide’ to return can even be compelled to sign forms confirming consent to ‘voluntary repatriation’, even if this is against their own intrinsic preferences or desires (Cleton and Chauvin, 2020). Boersema et al. (2014) call this process a ‘soft deportation’ (Leerkes, et al. 2017). The latter term indicates ‘that such return has deportation-like properties’, while acknowledging that it depends less on force and deterrence than ‘classic deportations. There are clearly very strong power dynamics involved, whose mechanisms are not sufficiently researched in the context of return migration. How power operates in voluntary return situations will be very interesting to examine in South-South return contexts studied by GAPs via individual trajectories. For example, is voluntary return in this context ‘soft deportation’?

Addressing this question requires a close look at how return aspirations are formed and imagined in a context of protracted displacement. It is important to take into account refugees’ broader life aspirations in interaction with individual characteristics and structural conditions. Time also plays a crucial role in how return is aspired and imagined (Müller-Funk and Fransen, 2022). These are all issues that we will explore in-depth in WP7.

**Deportation** creates an ultimate line between members and non-members, which is ‘constitutive of citizenship’ for the dominant group and disposability for the other (De Genova and Peutz 2010). Deportation may be entirely unexpected and unwanted for migrants (Peutz 2006). For example, a recent ethnography of migrants with deportation orders from the UK showed that they felt more ‘British’ than connected to any other homeland, so ‘return’ was perceived as unjust as well as difficult (Hasselberg 2016). Nicholas De Genova (2002, p. 439) coined the term **deportability** to name a universal condition shared by non-citizens that implies ‘the possibility of being removed from the space of the nation-state’. Although any unauthorised immigrant is theoretically subject to expulsion by the State, in practice not everyone can be forcibly relocated to their country of origin. Non-deportability often stems from the reluctance of origin States to cooperate on forced return. Indeed, deportation always requires the willingness of another State to accept the returnee (Gibney 2008). Variations in non-deportability shape the options available to government and NGO workers responsible for enforcing ‘return’.

Anthropological and sociological work often shows that return policies and discourses about migrant return support State agendas far more than they reflect refugee desires or needs. For example, research on Europe’s return discourses by Eleanor Paynter (2022) shows how they are based on ‘paratexts’ – political discourses produced in direct connection with policy or legal action (Brookey and Gray 2017). The discourse of ‘deservingness’ is used to justify racialised bordering practices that uphold a false refugee-economic migrant binary. This discourse then enables the deporting of economic migrants since they do not ‘deserve’ to be able to stay like supposed genuine refugees. Refugees can also become targets of discourses about social problems. In Germany, for instance, displaced people are blamed for economic and social difficulties and even for the creation of a crisis rather than being seen as themselves victims of crises (Holmes and Castañeda 2016). This lays the groundwork for deporting unruly individuals.

With the concept of ‘**assisted voluntary return**’ (when a State or agency facilitates a return of a migrant by providing transportation, funding, or other support), the notion of



‘voluntary’ is taken one step further and certainly beyond its original meaning. These processes are ostensibly designed to provide dignity and limited rights in situations of constrained options. In fact, anthropologists argue that they are directly linked to forced returns, deportations, and expulsions. Writing about Norway, Synnove Bendixsen (2016, p. 548) explains that ‘without assisted return, it becomes difficult to legitimise forced return, and without the latter, it becomes harder to implement the former’. She explains: ‘The government frequently presents assisted return programmes as a humanitarian option compared to forced returns, while the latter is legitimised by the argument that if irregular migrants “fail” to opt for assisted return, a forced return is the only option available to the government’ (ibid.). Thus ‘assistance’ seems to be quite forceful. Sharam Khosravi (2018, pp. 4-5) argues that deportees are part of a neoliberal moralising and ‘responsibilising’ project to make them believe that they have control over their lives before and after deportation. Rather than being subject to structural violence via deportation, deportation is positioned as the moral personal choice of migrants.

How do migrants feel about this situation? While researchers have attempted to understand the intentions and motivations of returnees and thereby to differentiate between voluntary and forced returns (Boehm 2016; Cassarino 2004), it is quite difficult to determine when a return is truly voluntarily (Akeesson and Baaz 2015; Kuschminder 2017, p. 6). More ethnographic research is needed on the perspective of migrants themselves and how trajectories – onward movements and re-orientations as well as periods of rest and intermediate forms of settlement – develop for them (Schapendonk et al. 2021).

Amidst this burgeoning focus on return migration for refugees, asylum seekers, and irregular migrants, little research has focused on **returnees’ lives after migration** (Khosravi 2018). Some experience ‘double abandonment’ (Lecadet 2013), rejected both abroad and also after they return. Most studies show that experiences after forced return are negative, with deportees feeling ‘estranged citizenship’ (Khosravi 2018, p. 7). Another topic that needs more research is reverse migration or re-migration – when a returnee leaves the country of origin and travels back to the host country. Although re-migration rates differ, some research shows that numbers of re-migrants are high. For example, up to 80 per cent of Afghans forcibly removed to Kabul attempt to remigrate (Gladwell and Elwyn 2012). Re-migration is sometimes defined as ‘failed social reintegration’ or ‘failed remixing’ in today’s dominant political discourses, but in fact, research shows that back and forth movement can be part of a migration strategy. Writing about Syrian refugees in Turkey, Biner and Biner (2021, p. 883) report that ‘depending on the border policies of the Turkish state and the intensity and location of the fighting in Syria, many travel regularly to their home cities and towns in Syria to check on their property and family members and to discern what the future may bring’. While it is important to criticise forced return to unsafe places, it is also important to remember that many refugees do want to return when conditions allow or – like any of us – they want to be able to freely move between homes, families, and live in more than one place, as return has more recently been portrayed as a life transition between separate geographic spaces and biographical times (Perez Murcia and Boccagni 2022). To explain the return orientations and practices of individuals, it is important to consider the meanings attributed to home by potential returnees and how these change over time (Boccagni 2022; Perez Murcia and Boccagni 2022).

## Anthropological and Sociological Definitions Applied in GAPs

In this project, we are interested in how people affected by deportation regimes define return, assistance, and voluntariness. The deportation regime, in its many shapes (Leerkes and Van Houte 2020) is the State technology of control and exclusion that is used to deal with unwanted populations (Peutz and De Genova 2010). From this perspective, beyond a mere act (Peutz and De Genova, 2010), deportation is rather viewed as a practice that is ‘constitutive of citizenship’, reaffirming the boundaries of membership to countries (Anderson, Gibney and Paoletti 2011). It has a symbolic role as a ‘spectacle’ of State enforcement to make the State look powerful in front of the public (Mainwaring and Silverman 2016). Others have explained it as a disciplining apparatus shaped by the needs of the informal labour market (Karadağ and Sert 2023). In WP7, GAPs will try to understand how migrants perceive the deportation regime as governance apparatuses (border controls, laws, policies, officials, etc.) and how this affects their trajectories. These perceptions are often used to explain the gap between removal and rejected asylum applications (Gibney and Hansen 2003) and the limits of ‘migration control’ (Ellermann 2008).

With an anthropological approach, we also aim to bring the role of perceptions, experiences, and emotions (hope/despair, capacity to move on with life/resilience) to the forefront as a means of understanding what return means for people involved in it. We seek particularly to identify the different forms of agency in migrant lifeworlds, examining when and how agency becomes apparent with regards to mobility and, more specifically, return. We ultimately explore the characteristics of trajectories in different locations (with the goal of developing a typology) to show the precarity, plurality, and multi-directionality of mobility. In addition to governance and agency, WP7 explores the role of social networks and integration contexts in shaping trajectories. In this way, the precise definition of return is an open question and we expect multiple conceptions to emerge from the field research.

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