

# Oberseminar

## VORTRAGSREIHE DES INSTITUTS FÜR ETHNOLOGIE

Leitung: Prof. Dr. Martin Sökefeld

19. 05. 2025

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### **Mobility Improvisation: Beyond suffering in irregularisation**

#### Abstract des Vortrags:

This paper explores the experiences of so-called "irregular migrants" beyond their suffering. However, it does so without discounting the suffering and hardship that is indeed experienced by migrants, as literature focusing on migrant "agency" and "resilience" at times has the potential to do. It argues for a more nuanced understanding of people's lives, highlighting their agency, resilience, and humour in navigating restrictive mobility regimes. Through ethnographic case studies of Punjabi migrants, it highlights the importance of understanding the affective dimensions of migration. This is accomplished by bringing to attention the affect-laden, social and cultural forces driving migration that are often ignored in favour of the labour market and integration-focused study of migration from the perspective of the state. In this vein, I theorise the concept of "mobility improvisation" as a mean of capturing the dynamic and creative ways irregularised migrants overcome obstacles, make decisions, and seek well-being in the face of enforced immobility. Choosing to flip the script, I call my interlocutors "mobility improvisers" rather than what is de rigueur in migration literature (i.e. "irregular migrants"). I believe that this reframing is necessary if we wish avoid to pigeonholing people into the "suffering slot" and avoid seeing them fully free of the burdens of severely unequal mobility regimes. As an important part of the puzzle—one often left out of research on migration—I suggest that humour, sarcasm, and cynicism may help us bridge the gulf between analyses that focus too much on the suffering victim on the one hand and the resilient agent on the other. For ethnographers of migration, this can provide a key point of access to understand the dynamic relationship between agency, power, and affect. Humour (light-hearted, dark or ironic) is not only a way for migrants to cope with hardship but also a valuable tool to make sense of (and communicate) their wide-ranging experiences from suffering to joy and everything in between and beyond.

OBERSEMINAR

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**16-18 Uhr**  
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