Irregular Migrants in Belgium and the Netherlands

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Irregular Migrants in Belgium and the Netherlands

Aspirations and Incorporation

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In loving memory of Petra van 't Padje

Content

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The Hague, March 2013
Masja van Meeteren

1 Irregular Migration as a Fact of Life

1.1 Irregular migration as a common feature of Western economies

Irregular migration has emerged in all Western economies since World War II (Sassen 1999), and it has risen considerably in past decades (Arango 2004; Castles & Miller 2003; Jahn & Straubhaar 1999).[1] In Northern Europe, this increase has partly been an unforeseen consequence of the end of foreign labour recruitment, which was introduced in the 1970s (Brochmann 1999b). In addition, the 1990s witnessed large numbers of asylum seekers in search of protection who were not granted asylum, but nevertheless illegally stayed in their destination countries (Koser & Lutz 1998). The increased number of irregular migrants in Northern European countries is thus in part a result of the incapacity of these states to deal with asylum seekers who have been denied refugee status or other forms of residence permit.

In reaction to these growing numbers, governments have developed policies to prevent irregular immigration (Albrecht 2002). Initially, these mainly targeted controlling the external borders of the European Union. In recent years, however, border controls have proved to have little effectiveness in preventing irregular migration (Brochmann 1999a; Cornelius 2005). Moreover, beyond a certain level of control the costs of avoiding irregular migration exceed the economic damage caused by irregular migration. This means that, from an economic perspective, the 'optimal' degree of irregular immigration is greater than zero (Entorf 2002; Hillman & Weiss 1999; Jahn & Straubhaar 1999). Therefore, policymakers in Europe have increasingly turned their focus towards internal control mechanisms (Brochmann 1999a; Broeders & Engbersen 2007). Border controls are still important, but they have been increasingly supplemented by policies of exclusion and discouragement. According to Broeders and Engbersen (2007: 1,593) exclusion from formal institutions of society is the main thrust of current policies aimed at irregular migrants: '[F]or those illegal aliens who cannot be discouraged or deterred to come, exclusion is meant to complicate and frustrate living and

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1   What term is best used to denote this type of migration has long been a subject of debate. In this book, the term 'irregular migrants' is used. Irregular migrants are defined as people who stay in the country of residence without permission from the authorities, regardless of whether the person entered legally or illegally and regardless of whether they are economically active or not. Section 1.4 provides a more elaborate discussion on the term.

working conditions to such a degree that they will turn round and try their luck elsewhere.' Examples of such internal control policies are exclusion from public services, increased surveillance by police, increased employer sanctions, incarceration and expulsion.

Although governments increasingly try to exclude and discourage irregular migrants, this does not mean they are successful in doing so. For example, many irregular migrants still manage to find work (Engbersen, Van San & Leerkes 2006; Paspalanova 2006, Van Meeteren, Van San & Engbersen 2008), and when irregular migrants are arrested, successful expulsion is only occasionally realised (Broeders 2009; Van der Leun 2003a). Moreover, even though some irregular migrants are successfully expelled, most Eastern Europeans simply come back the next day (Paspalanova 2006). Irregular migrants are difficult to expel, because they may hide their identity, and countries of origin are reluctant to take migrants back whose identities have not been established. Surveillance and identification have therefore recently become key words in internal measures for control of irregular migrants (Broeders & Engbersen 2007). States need to make irregular migrants 'legible' (Scott 1998) in order to successfully expel them. Migrants obviously try to circumvent such policy innovations. Recent news reports, for example, indicate that some migrants mutilate their fingertips so they cannot be definitively identified (*Trouw* 24 April 2009). As a consequence, policies aimed at irregular migrants and the actions that irregular migrants take to circumvent these resemble an arms race in which action provokes reaction (Broeders & Engbersen 2007). So far, the irregular migrants who live in the destination countries appear to be the winners of this 'tug-of-war' (Düvell 2006a: 8).

It appears that neither countries that rely on strong external controls, nor countries that have a dense system of internal controls are successful in managing irregular migration (Düvell 2006a). One of the most important reasons is that there exists a demand for the informal labour that irregular migrants can provide.[2] Many companies would not be able to compete on the international market were it not for the benefits they derive from employing informally. In Western Europe, employers have strong incentives to hire informal workers in order to avoid paying relatively high minimum

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2   Following the World Bank definition of the informal economy, informal labour can be defined as labour that takes place 'partially or fully outside government regulation, taxation and observation'. Note that in most cases, the informal labour irregular migrants engage in concerns labour fully outside government regulation, taxation and observation. Migrants are not the only ones who participate in the informal labour market, non-migrants do so too. See Van Meeteren (2013) for more information on informal labour and irregular migrants.

wages and social insurance contributions (Jordan & Düvell 2002). Firms' continuing search for flexibility under pressure from international competition is thought to be responsible for employers' attempts to avoid the costs associated with regular jobs due to employment regulations (Sassen 1999). The specific demand for informal labour is considered to be one of the reasons why irregular immigration continues to exist in spite of unemployment among legal citizens and increasing deployment of employer sanctions (Ambrosini 2010; Castles & Miller 2003). The extent to which employer sanctions are enforced differs from country to country and even from sector to sector. Whereas some labour sectors are relatively unaffected by checks, others are controlled on a more regular basis (Abella 2000).

Consequently, it is both impossible and partly undesirable for governments to completely avoid irregular immigration. Moreover, once irregular immigrants are there, they are difficult to expel, making the presence of irregular immigrants a fact of life in European countries (see also Baldwin-Edwards 2008). All European countries experience irregular migration, albeit on different scales and in different ways (Düvell 2008). The presence of irregular migrants in Western societies has inspired social scientific investigations into the ways these migrants live in countries where they are not allowed to reside. These studies have analysed the different ways in which irregular migrants are incorporated in receiving societies (see, e.g., Adam et al. 2002; Burgers & Engbersen 1999; Chavez 1998; Engbersen et al. 2006; Hagan 1994; Jordan & Düvell 2002; Leman, Siewiera & Van Broeck 1994; Mahler 1995; Düvell 2006d; Van Nieuwenhuyze 2009). The next section provides a concise overview of these studies and formulates three interrelated research questions within the context of this branch of research.

1.2   Studying the lives of irregular migrants

Although the presence of irregular migrants has been a common feature of Western economies for decades, the bulk of social research has traditionally been aimed at studying its causes and finding ways to solve the 'problem' (Portes 1978: 469). Recently, attention has also been directed to its consequences in terms of its effects on native employment and on wage levels (see, e.g., Ambrosini 2001; Amir 2000; Carter 2005; Chiswick 2000; Djajic 1997; Gosh 2000; Hazari & Sgro 2000; Martin 2010; Sarris & Zografakis 1999; Tapinos 2000; Venturini 1998; Yoshida & Woodland 2005). The first efforts to study the way irregular migrants live were made in the United States in the 1970s and 1980s (see, e.g., Chavez 1998; Cornelius 1982; Massey

et al. 1987; Portes & Bach 1985; Rodriguez 1987). European studies followed from the mid-1990s and are therefore relatively recent (see, e.g., Adam et al. 2002; Alt 1999; Anderson 1999; Burgers & Engbersen 1999; Devillé 2006, 2008; Düvell 2004; Engbersen et al. 1999; Engbersen et al. 2002; Jordan & Düvell 2002; Lazaridis & Romaniszyn 1998; Leerkes et al. 2004; Leman et al. 1994; Paspalanova 2006; Slimane 1995; Staring 2001; Triandafyllidou & Kosic 2006; Van der Leun 2003b; Van Nieuwenhuyze 2007). As a consequence, the number of European studies of the lives of irregular migrants in receiving societies is still limited, especially compared to the United States, where the quality of the research also seems most encouraging (Düvell 2006c).

Some of these efforts to study how irregular migrants live consist of exploratory research involving irregular immigrants from multiple ethnic backgrounds within one region (Krasinets 2005; Slimane 1995) or country (Adam et al. 2002; Alt 1999; Anderson 1999; Burgers & Engbersen 1999; Engbersen et al. 2002; Lianos 2001; Gibney 1999). Other studies focus on a single ethnic group within one nation-state (Düvell 2004; Kalir 2005a; Lazaridis & Poyago-Theotoky 1999; Portes & Bach 1985; Rivera-Batiz 1999; Staring 2001) or within one city (Grzymala-Kazlowska 2005). Furthermore, scholars have increasingly begun to compare two or more ethnic groups that have been strategically selected within one nation-state, region or city (Engbersen et al. 1999; Jordan & Düvell 2002; Lazaridis & Romaniszyn 1998; Leerkes et al. 2004; Leman 1997; Mahler 1995; Paspalanova 2006; Triandafyllidou & Kosic 2006). Apart from a few edited books (e.g., Düvell 2006d), only one study has systematically compared the lives of irregular migrants in two national contexts (Van Nieuwenhuyze 2009). This case involved migrants with a similar ethnic background who were compared across two countries.

The questions that are typically addressed in these studies concern irregular migrants' migration histories, their work practices and job search activities, housing conditions, access to health care, social contacts and everyday strategies to remain undetected by the authorities. Because much of this research is exploratory in nature, many findings remain primarily empirical (Devillé 2006; Paspalanova 2006). As a result, there has been relatively little attempt at comparison or theory-building beyond specific empirical contexts (Black 2003; Bloch & Chimienti 2011; Cvajner & Sciortino 2010; see Portes 1997). However, these limited attempts have increased our understanding of the ways in which irregular migrants live in Western societies, and they have spurred the evolution of some theoretical debates. By far most of the work that has yielded theoretical contributions has been undertaken in two closely connected areas of research. The first area involves the description and explanation of different patterns of

incorporation of irregular migrants, and the second concerns analyses of the significance of different forms of capital for irregular migrants. These theoretical concerns are related to the questions of how irregular migrants manage to incorporate in receiving societies where they are not allowed to be and what makes them more or less successful at achieving this. These areas are also the theoretical focus of this book.

The main problem with current research practice on the incorporation of irregular migrants, which is discussed in detail in the next chapter, is its scattered nature. Although attempts have been made to arrive at theoretically meaningful findings by means of comparative research, these have been limited in important ways. To arrive at more comprehensive theoretical insights, this volume proposes an alternative approach to address the questions of what patterns of incorporation can be distinguished among irregular migrants and how these can best be understood.

This book contributes to the main theoretical debates regarding the way irregular migrants live in Western societies. In doing so, naturally the focus cannot be on all Western societies, which is why Belgium[3] and the Netherlands are used as case studies. The choice of these two countries stems from very practical considerations. I already had at my disposal many interviews with irregular migrants from previous research I had been involved in. As there were no theoretical or methodological objections to the choice of these two countries, I decided to profit from the previous experiences. The fact that the choice of countries in which the research was to take place was mainly based on practical reasons does not mean that the choice of these countries is not theoretically sound. The relevance of these national contexts is discussed in Chapter 4, on immigration policies. The following sections discuss some conceptual considerations concerning the terms 'irregular migrants' and 'incorporation' as they are used throughout this book.

1.3   Irregular migrants: Who are they?

The topic of irregular migration has received increasing attention in political and public debates in the past decades (Düvell 2006b). As irregular migra-

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3   In this book, I consistently speak of Belgium as a national entity even though the data on which this book is based were gathered in Flanders and Brussels only. Because for the irregular migrants in question, Belgium is the relevant frame of reference and for reasons of readability of the text, I have chosen to speak of Belgium instead of the longer and more confusing Flanders and Brussels.

tion is mostly perceived as a threat to European societies and economies, these debates tend to focus on the question of how to prevent irregular migration (Paspalanova 2006; Uehling 2004). At the basis of this perceived threat lie social myths and stereotypical images of irregular migrants as criminals (Coutin 2005b), welfare abusers or a source of unfair job competition (Broeders & Engbersen 2007; Devillé 2008; Eaton 1998). Research has indicated that few irregular migrants engage in criminal acts (Leerkes 2009; Van Meeteren et al. 2008) and few use welfare provisions (Cyrus & Vogel 2006; Düvell 2006c; Hondagneu-Sotelo 1994; Van der Leun 2003a; Van Meeteren et al. 2008). Moreover, the labour that irregular migrants provide is generally complementary instead of substitutional (Jordan & Düvell 2002; Samers 2005; Venturini 1998). Nevertheless, these myths are widely accepted as common knowledge (Devillé 2008). Some scholars claim that it is because of the terminology used to denote this group of migrants that they have become surrounded with negative connotations which feed these social myths. Some blame social scientists, who have labelled irregular migrants 'illegals' or 'illegal aliens', for their role in this process. No consensus has been reached among scholars on what the proper terminology should be (see also Paspalanova 2006; Uehling 2004). It is therefore important to explain what is meant by 'irregular migration' and 'irregular migrants' in this book. Moreover, it should be made clear why these concepts are used and not others.

Irregular migration is sometimes referred to as 'undocumented', 'unauthorised' or 'illegal' migration. Likewise, irregular migrants are denoted 'undocumented' or 'illegal' migrants. When referring to *migration*, the adjective 'illegal' is mostly used uncritically. However, the practice of labelling *migrants* as 'illegal' has been the cause of much discussion. While in legal systems and in most public discourses the term 'illegal migrants' or even 'illegals' is usually employed, social scientists prefer to refer to 'undocumented' or 'irregular' migrants in order to avoid any discriminatory connotation and to prevent criminalisation (Düvell 2006b). Some argue that the term 'illegal' should not be used, because it is incorrect, as it wrongfully refers to a state of being (Schinkel 2005). After all, a person cannot *be* illegal; only his or her stay or employment can be. According to Paspalanova (2006) it is precisely this practice – the use of the word 'illegal' to refer to people – which has fuelled the perception of irregular migrants as a threat and as criminals. Because of these critiques most social scientists have stopped using the term. Recently, however, a small group of scholars purposefully employed the term and justified its use by arguing that it is precisely migrants' illegality which should be at the centre of research, as it is central to the lives irregular

migrants lead. In their opinion, researchers ought to ask the question of what it means to lack a valid residence status (Donato & Armenta 2011). Willen (2007a, 2007b) argues that migrant illegality should not only be seen as a juridical status and a socio-political condition; the impact of illegality on migrants' everyday lives, on their experiences of being-in-the-world, should be considered as well. De Genova (2005, 2007) likewise claims that migrants' experiences of their illegality should be studied.

As the latter arguments have been put forward relatively recently and have remained exceptional or outsider positions, the majority of scholars have tried to find a substitute word for 'illegal'. In this connection, the term 'undocumented' has been coined. Although less subject to debate, the term lacks precision. After all, migrants who reside illegally may well possess documents. Furthermore, they may currently lack proper documentation, but they might have crossed the border using legitimate papers. Moreover, some migrants own an abundance of documentation owing to their struggle to become legalised (see also Chauvin & Garcés-Mascareñas 2012). This means they not only possess a lot of legal documents themselves, but they may have been documented by the state as well. As a consequence, they are not necessarily undocumented vis-à-vis the receiving state. In order to avoid the shortcomings of terms such as 'illegal' or 'undocumented', the term 'irregular migrants' was coined. This term avoids the practice of labelling people as 'illegal,' while it simultaneously makes clear that these are not migrants who have followed the *regular* legal paths.

Unfortunately, there is a downside to all the discussed terminology that the concept 'irregular migrants' has not been able to avoid. Distinguishing between irregular and regular migrants offers a simple dichotomy, implying that a migrant is regular or irregular in the same way that a migrant is legal or illegal, authorised or unauthorised, documented or undocumented. However, there are three aspects that determine migrant status: entry, residence and employment (Düvell 2008; Gosh 1998). The tendency to conflate entry, employment and residence is probably a result of the fact that these are often intertwined (Gosh 1998; Samers 2001). With all this confusion surrounding the terminology, it is important to be clear about what is meant in the present study. In this book, irregular migrants are defined as people who stay in the country without official permission to do so at the time of the research, regardless of whether they entered the country legally and regardless of whether they are economically active.

Although this may sound like a solid definition, even this definition requires further explanation due to the complexity of the subject at hand. Developments surrounding European integration have significantly diversi-

fied irregular migration in terms of legal categories (Jandl et al. 2009). Large groups of people – such as Bulgarians and Rumanians – do not need a visa to enter the European Union, but are allowed to cross the border with their passports. These migrants may stay legally (as tourists) usually for three months, but they are not allowed to work. However, many of them settle down and engage in informal employment. During the first period of their stay, their employment is irregular, but their stay is not. In this situation, they are not considered as irregular migrants. It is only when their legal stay expires that they become the subject of this book.

Although no uniformly accepted term yet exists (Paspalanova 2006), the term 'irregular migrants' is gaining in popularity and has the potential to become the new standard. For this reason and because it avoids stigmatising migrants by labelling them 'illegal,' I am content to use the term 'irregular migrants'. Additionally, I should technically speak of 'immigrants' instead of 'migrants'. However, for reasons of readability, I chose to use the version that reads most easily. In most cases, whenever I speak of 'migrants', the reader should understand this to mean 'immigrants'.

1.4   Incorporation, assimilation, integration

Various concepts are used to analyse the ways in which immigrants live in receiving societies. Traditionally scholars have employed the concept of assimilation, which refers to a linear process by which immigrants give up past languages, identities, cultural practices and loyalties to gradually become full members of the destination country (Asslin et al. 2006). In such a view, different processes of integration or incorporation are thought to follow one another in progressive stages towards full assimilation. Hence, assimilation is regarded as the inevitable outcome of subsequent processes of incorporation (Bloemraad, Korteweg & Yurdakul 2008). With time, scholarly attention has shifted from the study of assimilation to the scrutiny of processes of incorporation or integration. American studies usually use the concept of incorporation, while European scholars use the concept of integration.

Studies of integration have not traditionally implied a linear conception of these processes. They do conceive the concept to comprise some kind of hierarchy: it is used as a scale on which one immigrant or group of immigrants can 'score' better than another. What 'better' exactly refers to usually differs from study to study. Social scientists compare groups of immigrants based on certain criteria they have developed to measure inte-

gration (Schinkel 2010). Traditional markers of integration are, for example, economic advancement, educational attainment and cultural acceptance. These are measured in diverse ways. Practical issues such as availability of data play a role in the use of different indicators for integration.

Despite the different ways in which integration is measured, scholars generally agree that integration is a multi-dimensional concept. Views on what the relevant dimensions of integration are differ only slightly among authors. In the Netherlands, the most common distinction is the one between socio-economic integration and socio-cultural integration (see, e.g., Liem & Veld 2005; Nugter 2004; SCP 2004). Others distinguish among the functional, the expressive and the moral dimensions of integration (see, e.g., Engbersen 2003; Engbersen & Gabriels 1995; Peters 1993); among economic, social, cultural and political integration (see, e.g., Fermin 1997); between structural integration and socio-cultural integration (see, e.g., Dagevos 2001; Vermeulen & Penninx 1994); or between social and ethnic-cultural integration (see, e.g., Dagevos, Gijsberts & Van Praag 2003). All in all, many slightly different dimensions of the concept of integration are used, and there is no consensus on the best conceptualisation, let alone on of what elements these dimensions are best composed. Social scientists thus infuse the concept of integration with different content by distinguishing different dimensions and items. Moreover, scholars do not usually provide definitions of the concept of integration itself. As a consequence, the concept has acquired a range of different contents, with the one used usually being that which best suits the current research objective.

This lack of clarity among social scientists is not only responsible for the ambiguity surrounding the concept of integration, it has shifted the public and political debate on the integration of immigrants in Europe as well. As a consequence, the discursive meaning of integration has changed. The word now has a stronger cultural connotation than before (Bloemraad et al. 2008; Schinkel 2010; Snel 2003; Van Meeteren 2005). Integrating is something that immigrants are obliged to do, according to current mainstream discourse. The term has become normative and lost its neutral meaning as a tool for analysis. For the current study, I discovered that this new connotation complicated fieldwork. My respondents were very sensitive to issues concerning integration, especially when I asked questions that could be interpreted as having to do with their cultural integration. For example, many respondents were quick to assure me that they associated with Belgians or Dutch people. I usually had to make some effort to find out that they were referring to their employers, with whom they occasionally had a brief chat, and not to long-lasting friendships.

It is clear that, these days, the concept of integration requires a proper introduction before it can be used as a tool for analysis. One might even argue that it has become useless for research purposes, as it is no longer regarded a neutral concept. I myself experienced the confusion it generates – not only as among respondents, but also in academic circles. At the start of my project I used the term integration, but each time I presented my work at a conference or in some informal gathering, I noticed that it led to huge misunderstandings. Slowly it dawned on me that it would not be convenient to use the concept, because people had too many normative preconceptions.

After careful consideration, I chose to skip the concept of integration because of the confusion it generated and to use the concept of 'incorporation' instead. This concept has previously been employed in the study of how immigrants live in receiving societies (see, e.g., Chavez 1991; Hagan 1998; Itzigsohn & Giorguli-Saucedo 2005; Nee & Sanders 2001; Portes 1995a; Portes & Rumbaut 1996; Rusinovic 2006; Van der Leun 2000, 2003a; Van der Leun & Kloosterman 2006; Van Tubergen, Flap & Maas 2004; Yurdacul & Bodemann 2007). Incorporation is conceptualised and measured in an analogous way to integration. However, 'incorporation' offers the benefit of not causing too much confusion in Europe. Thus, despite its similar practical use among social scientists, the concept's connotations are more neutral.

2   Beyond Victims and Communities

Bringing in aspirations

2.1   Current research practice on incorporation

The presence of irregular migrants has been a fact of life in Western societies for decades. However, attempts to study their lives in these countries have long remained limited to the United States (see, e.g., Chavez 1998; Cornelius 1982; Hagan 1994; Mahler 1995; Massey et al. 1987; Portes & Bach 1985; Rodriguez 1987). The question of how irregular migrants are incorporated in receiving societies has gained footing in Europe only since the mid-1990s. After the pioneering Dutch project *The Unknown City* (Burgers & Engbersen 1999), studies of other European countries soon followed. These countries include Belgium (Adam et al. 2002; Devillé 2008; Grzymala-Kazlowska 2005; Leman et al. 1994; Paspalanova 2006; Slimane 1995; Van Nieuwenhuyze 2007, 2009), Germany (Alt 1999), the United Kingdom (Anderson 1999; Jordan & Düvell 2002), Greece (Lazaridis & Romaniszyn 1998), Italy (Kosic & Triandafyllidou 2004) and Portugal (Eaton 1998).

Even though these studies deal with various ethnic or nationality groups in different national or local contexts, many parallel outcomes are reported. These similarities usually concern the problems irregular migrants face due to their difficult position, ranging from finding affordable and adequate housing to getting access to medical care. While some of the older studies have reported that irregular migrants managed to find ways to work legally, recent studies document that irregular migrants are nowadays only able to access the informal labour market.

Alongside these similar findings, the same studies report rather different results on other aspects, for example, concerning the relevance of ethnic networks and the importance of cultural capital for irregular migrants. There are many possible reasons for the diverging outcomes, considering the diversity in groups and contexts studied. For example, whereas Engbersen et al. (2006) find high levels of in-group solidarity among Turkish irregular migrants in The Hague, Mahler (1995) finds co-ethnic exploitation among Salvadoran and South American migrants in Long Island. Such contradictory findings can be attributed to differences in the organisation of the respective communities and their migration histories, to distinct national and local policy contexts, and to other significant variations between the two research settings. However, one does not know what factors are in fact

responsible for these different outcomes; only tentative post hoc interpretations can be made.

The variety in groups and contexts therefore complicates theoretical generalisation (Mahler 1995). Due to the impossibility of random sampling, drawing inferences is always a problem in research on irregular migrants, but the broad range of groups and contexts involved makes it an even bigger challenge. Therefore, many researchers have forsaken attempts to arrive at general theories on the way irregular migrants are incorporated into Western societies. Instead, some have turned to (historical) particularistic explanations, offering thick descriptions of the conditions of a distinct ethnic group in a certain area to allow for increased understanding of how these specific conditions of this particular group of irregular migrants have led them to become the way they are now (see, e.g., Hagan 1994; Kalir 2005a; Massey, Goldring & Durand 1994).

However, most researchers have started to try to contextualise theories and develop sophisticated comparative research designs in order to single out factors responsible for different outcomes. These attempts usually involve two or more strategically selected ethnic or national groups within one receiving nation-state, region or city. For example, Engbersen et al. (2006) compare Turks and Bulgarians in The Hague, Leman (1997) studies Columbians and Poles in Brussels, Lazaridis and Romaniszyn (1998) compare Albanians and Poles in Greece, and Jordan and Düvell (2002) analyse the lives of migrants from Brazil, Turkey and Poland in the United Kingdom. Although these studies offer many valuable insights, they share various problems, which are discussed in the following sections.

2.2   Common perspective focused on survival

One major aspect that studies on irregular migrants have in common is their perspective on the lives of irregular migrants. Scholars extensively show that irregular migrants' pre-migratory expectations can be unrealistically high (Adam et al. 2002; Staring 1999; Mahler 1995). Stories are frequently quoted of migrants who thought that the streets in the destination country were paved with gold (see, e.g., Staring 1999: 64). Consequently, when migrants find out that the society they encounter does not offer the opportunities they envisioned, their adaptation processes are automatically oriented *downwardl*y. Many studies chronicle broken dreams and irregular migrants dealing with difficult conditions. In doing so, scholars equate the adaptation process that irregular migrants go through with a process of learning 'how

to survive' in the receiving societies. The story portrayed in most studies is a narrative of irregular migrants struggling to survive. While they had high expectations before they came, little is left of these once they arrive, and *survival* becomes the central theme in their lives.

The implicit assumption that the original expectations of irregular migrants fade upon arrival has been strengthened by the commonly held idea that irregular migrants have little control over their lives. Mahler (1995: 7), for example, claims that migrants' efforts 'are largely conditioned by macro-structural forces over which individuals have little, if any, power'. She consequently does not differentiate in terms of newly developed motivations, but instead emphasises 'the common experiences and dilemmas' (ibid.: 28) her informants face. Devillé (2006) denoted this dominant perspective, which implicitly assumes that irregular migrants have little to no control over their lives, as a 'victim perspective'. She observes that most researchers describe irregular migrants as victims of laws and policies who are unable to undertake much action to improve their situation.

While in Mahler's work the notion of 'survival' remains implicit, many other scholars explicitly use this term (e.g., Adam et al. 2002; Andrews, Ybarra & Miramontes 2002; Bloch, Sigona & Zetter 2011; Chavez 1998; Cvajner & Sciortino 2009; Datta et al. 2007; Düvell 2004; Düvell & Jordan 2006; Engbersen 1996; Jordan 2006; King & Mai 2004; Kosic & Triandafyllidou 2004; Psimmenos & Kassimati 2006; Triandafyllidou & Kosic 2006; Van Nieuwenhuyze 2009). Adam et al. (2002: 115), for example, write that their book is about 'accounting for the ways in which foreigners without documents live, *or more precisely survive*, in their clandestine situation' (my translation, italics added). Another example of the explicit use of the notion 'survival' stems from the work of Chavez (1998: 6). One of his main research questions is, 'What kind of strategies do migrants and settlers employ to survive?' Along the same lines, in the work of Jordan and Düvell (2002), the chapter called 'Why They Come' is followed by a chapter entitled 'How They Survive', and Triandafyllidou and Kosic (2006: 106) analyse the 'survival strategies' of irregular migrants.

While most scholars uncritically use the notion 'survival', others feel they have to explain themselves. For example, Van Nieuwenhuyze (2009: 97) writes, 'the uncertainty and the insecurity of their existence justify the notion of survival strategy'. According to Datta et al. (2007: 405), the notion of survival *strategies* is even too strong, as it does not do justice to the 'powerlessness' migrants experience. They therefore prefer to speak of the 'tactics' migrants employ to 'survive'.