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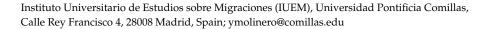
State Thought and Migration: Analysing the Ideological Underpinnings of Temporary Migration Programmes

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Abstract: This paper analyses temporary migration programs (TMPs) as a manifestation of the "State thought" ideology, drawing on Abdelmalek Sayad's sociological framework. Sayad considers the State central to the migration system, shaping perceptions and practices around migration through its ideological and structural dominance. The paper first explores how the State constructs hegemonic ideologies around migration, emphasising the dichotomy between nationals and non-nationals. TMPs epitomise these ideologies by promoting utilitarian migration systems that maximise economic benefits while minimising social integration. TMPs, such as agricultural guest worker schemes, enforce strict temporality, denying migrants permanence and full participation in host societies. Migrants are treated as disposable labour, restricted by non-transferable permits, and confined to precarious living conditions. The paper highlights the tension between the economic reliance on migrant labour and the State's exclusionary policies, revealing TMPs as tools for controlling and exploiting migrants while maintaining national homogeneity. Ultimately, TMPs embody the pinnacle of "State thought", balancing economic utility and sovereignty by perpetuating provisionality, exclusion, and systemic exploitation. The paper concludes by acknowledging migrants' agency as they navigate and resist the structural constraints of TMPs to pursue personal and collective goals, challenging these programmes' colonial and utilitarian underpinnings.

Keywords: Abdelmalek Sayad; temporary migration programs; state thought; labour migration; migrant farmworkers

1. Introduction

In Abdelmalek Sayad's sociology of migration, the state plays a central role (Avallone and Molinero-Gerbeau 2021). For the Algerian sociologist, the state is both the fundamental unit of the world-system and the most decisive actor in understanding migration. His perception, in this sense, goes beyond the classic Weberian definition. For Sayad, the state is not only a bureaucratic body or an entity that exercises the monopoly of legitimate physical violence, but it is also a mental structure (Avallone and Torre 2013) so that, as Pierre Bourdieu said, we have "the state in our heads" (Raimondi 2016). This means that through socialisation, state agencies—primarily schools—educate citizens to internalise and reproduce its categories of thought: a shared framework of perception and classification. These common principles shape individuals' analysis of social reality, including migration (Gil-Araujo 2025). In this way, the state consolidates itself by reproducing in citizens the knowledge and perceptions that structure its social order, guaranteeing its survival not only on a material but also on a symbolic level (Boudou 2023). This article will argue that these mental structures form an ideology so that what Bourdieu (1993) referred to as "state spirit"

and Sayad (2004a) as "state thought" is, in reality, the ideology of the state, understood as its cosmovision on how the world has to function and be ruled.

The aim of this article is twofold. Through a theoretical review, this article will first reflect on how state thought conforms to an ideology, following both Sayad's own analysis and that of those who have studied his work in recent years. This will allow us to identify the hegemonic social perception of migration advocated by the state. After this, a review of how temporary migration programmes (TMP) function will be proposed, analysing them through Sayad's lens with the aim of showing that these, by articulating the perfect utopia of migration control and utilitarianism, represent the embodiment of state thought like no other element of migration policies.

2. State and Migration

For Sayad, "thinking about immigration means thinking about the state" (Sayad 2004a, p. 279) since it is the state that defines who is an immigrant, but also who is an emigrant, given that the person who migrates carries out a double process, that is, leaving a state of which one is a national, to enter a different state of which one is non-national. Hence Sayad's statocentric view (Avallone and Molinero-Gerbeau 2021). The post-colonial world is defined by nation-states, making any departure from one inherently an entry into another. As a result, whenever a person migrates, the state inevitably plays a central role. Crossing borders implies both legitimately and illegitimately entering another state, which is the first problem that every migrant faces. This is because the state is seen as a territory belonging to its citizens, who determine, through its authority, how and who may cross its borders. A key aspect of this relationship is that migrants must seek permission to enter (Avallone and Torre 2013). Both orders, that of immigration and that of the nation, are intrinsically linked to such an extent that they cannot speak of the one without falling into the other since the "national would only exist in the presence [...] of its opposite or in opposition to its opposite, the non-national" (Sayad 2013, p. 67).

Thus, there can be no migration without a sovereign state with a territory over which it can exercise its sovereignty over the foreigner because "the nation-state was born with the aim of limiting and controlling the free movement of bodies" (Raimondi 2016, p. 26). If one of the basic attributes of a state is to have a physical territory delimited by specific borders over which it exercises its sovereignty, it means that where there is control over who enters, then the state exists. The migrant thus challenges the national order and threatens its integrity, for "it concerns people who should not be there [...] but who are there" (Sayad 2004a, p. 280), showing that state control is not total and that national homogeneity is a fallacy. Immigration lays bare this fiction by deconstructing the collective illusion on which the very justification for the existence of the state rests, thus constituting itself a challenge to its structures.

So, if migration constitutes the limit of the nation-state (Sayad 2004a), why does the state allow migrants to penetrate its body? Beyond the fact that total control is unattainable, the state needs migrants for two fundamental reasons.

The first has to do with its very existence. If the original reason for the gestation of the state is to limit and control the free movement of bodies, it means that an absence of such bodies would collapse the main justification on which the state is based. This means the state needs migrants over whom it can limit entry or expel, or, in other words, over whom it can exercise its sovereign power. According to Sayad, "where there is expulsion, there is state" (Raimondi 2016, p. 46), and the power of expulsion is one of its fundamental prerogatives, as it establishes it as the guarantor of national homogeneity by having the power to evict from its body anyone who violates its rules. The very nature of sovereignty refers to the power to expel foreigners, that is, deporting from their territory those people

whose residence does not fulfil the legal requirements for it. State thought defines migrants as potentially expellable (Sayad 2004a), a characteristic that does not apply to natives, and that is justified because, as they are non-citizens, they have not signed the Hobbesian contract with the state (Raimondi 2016). Both powers—expulsion and rejection—justify the state's existence and, therefore, can only occur if people are trying to enter it.

The second reason has to do with migratory utilitarianism, that is, "the propensity of states [...] to reduce and organise the migratory phenomenon only in terms of its economic utility" (Décosse 2013, p. 113), and the fact is that, if on the one hand migrants are undesirable for the state, on the other hand, they are necessary as a reserve army. As Sayad reveals, migration fulfils a systemic function in global capitalism by performing those jobs that are necessary for the economy but which the populations at the core of the world-system are unwilling to do:

> "On the one hand, [there is] a set of (technically) devalued and (socially) devalued tasks, and therefore unattractive only to an undemanding labour force obliged to accept them. On the other hand, a foreign labour force lacking the attributes and social qualities that would raise its "price", and therefore totally available to accept the tasks assigned to it". (Sayad 2010b, p. 255)

This generates a mismatch between the necessary economic-technical function that migrants fulfil in destination societies and the social cost that their presence entails both in terms of establishment and control (Sayad 1991b). Thus, the migrant's presence would be justified by its economic utility but also only for its economic utility. "The immigrant exists only because of work, for work, in work; outside of work, there is no salvation for him" (Sayad 2010b, p. 252), and the state thus turns immigration into something functional for its interests. In this way, labour justifies migration policies because, by showing only the economic side of migration, it solves the problem of inadmissibility, as it takes place on a common ground of reciprocal interests in which the inadmissible becomes admissible (Raimondi 2016). According to Sayad, the ideal immigrant for the state would be a pure body, a bodily machine with a system of levers and gears that can be used for work and that does not generate any more problems (Sayad 2010c), but since this is not possible, the illusion of the provisional is produced. The person will only be physically present as long as he has a justification for it and is always reminded about this condition by, for instance, constantly renewing his residence permits. Provisionality then refers to an unstable status where the legal apparatus transmits to migrants the idea that their presence may be revoked if they stop being "utile" for the state. This may even last all over migrants' lives, becoming an illusion because, factically, they have permanently stayed (Sayad 2006).

Since migrants' presence is only justified by work, they can only be present on a temporary basis. For the moment (however late) that the migrant finishes his job, he can no longer justify his presence in the destination state (Sayad 2004b). Immigration laws and the system of permits organise this process by linking visa renewals to the condition that the migrant justifies his usefulness to the host society. Thus, even if the foreigner eventually spends his entire life in the destination state, in the eyes of society (and himself), he will be defined as provisional and, therefore, revocable at any time (Gil-Araujo 2025). This provisionality refers not only to physical presence but also to other aspects. One of the most noteworthy is that of accommodation, since having a temporary presence, the "immigrant can only be housed as an emergency" (Sayad 1991a, p. 83) in precarious and provisional accommodation for a poor and provisional worker. The illusion of the provisional also refers to the condition of the "expellable", as mentioned earlier. The migrant is not only authorised to reside at the destination because of his work function but is also conditioned to "good behaviour". He must, therefore, always reassure the host society, even if he gives no reason for fear, because his mere condition as a non-national obliges him to a kind

of social hyper-correction that, if violated, can turn into expulsion (Sayad 2004a). This, therefore, implies his denial as a political being, as he is obliged to be discreet and neutral if he wants to remain a "guest" in the destination state (Sayad 2010b).

This string of elements makes up the state's relationship with migration, according to Abdelmalek Sayad's worldview. The following section will analyse how this shapes the ideology of state thought.

3. State Thought as Ideology

For the state to be able to maintain this relationship with migrations and, therefore, to guarantee that its existence and actions are perceived as legitimate by its sovereign body, it needs to think of the phenomenon in the same way. For Sayad, no social fact reflects the arbitrary character of the state as much as migrations, as they bring to the surface its selective and repressive character, sustained only to guarantee its own existence (Raimondi 2016). Questioning the state's existence could hypothetically lead to its fall, which is why one of its main prerogatives is to create "state human beings", that is, citizens who think of the world with state categories and do not question the division between nationals and non-nationals.

The state manufactures state human beings mainly, but not only, through schools, where education "produces the naturalisation of its own arbitrary historical assumptions" (Raimondi 2016, p. 25). Here, the state shapes the minds of citizens to perceive social reality on the basis of its own categories, whose starting point is the division between nationals and non-nationals. Through the school, citizens incorporate the state as an unquestionable entity and the division based on nationality as a natural premise of human relations. This incorporates the idea that the state is the property of the citizens, thus naturalising the division between those who are entitled to it and those who are out of place. This ideology is so powerful that even in the most subaltern social areas, migrants (especially if they are poor) are considered a danger (Avallone and Torre 2013).

The mental structures imposed by the state organising our representation of the world conform state thought, which has become, over time, one of Sayad's most commonly referred concepts (Sayad 2004a). Some have analysed it theoretically (Gil-Araujo 2025; Boudou 2023; Avallone and Molinero-Gerbeau 2021; Avallone 2019), while others have applied the concept to show how it conditions specific migrant realities such as migratory policies (Molinero-Gerbeau and Sajir 2024), return programs (Gil-Araujo and Cortés 2024) or migrants identities (Calabretta and Ragone 2024).

This article argues that state thought is the state's ideology insofar as it is a worldview about the order of things and the social organisation of human beings whose ultimate goal is perpetuating its own existence. By challenging the homogeneity of the national order and revealing its discriminatory character, migration, according to Sayad, is the phenomenon that brings state thinking to the surface (Boudou 2023). Immigration strips the state bare, denaturalising it and thus deconstructing a reality that citizens take for granted and do not question (Sayad 2004a). This is why migrants, in the eyes of the State, are hostile. They are dangerous to its order as they dismantle its history and threaten it with their presence. This leads the state to develop and organise complex mechanisms to control migrants' bodies and mobility. Thus, not only does it monitor this potential danger, but by constructing them as enemies, it reinforces national unity and thus its existence (Avallone and Torre 2013).

Unlike other political ideologies, state thought is neither overt nor organised around groups or parties that openly advocate it as a political option. In the contemporary post-colonial world, there are no alternatives to the State. It is State or barbarism. The state is then presented as the natural order of things in such a way that limits our capacity to question it. Therefore, state thought is an absolute ideology that organises our society

and from which every social fact starts at an unconscious level. It is a "perfect agreement between mental structures and objective structures" (Bourdieu 1993, p. 50). This is why it is not so much reflected in public opinion as in the spontaneous reactions of nationals to issues that affect the life of the state (Raimondi 2016). The production of these categories of thought, therefore, is one of the state's most powerful attributes, for by ensuring that they are spontaneously applied to any element, including the state itself, it prevents dissidence towards its model (Avallone and Torre 2013)

In short, state thought can be defined as the ideology elaborated and reproduced by the state through which it naturalises its postulates and creates state human beings who spontaneously or unconsciously reproduce its categories of thought. In the case of migration, state thought is characterised, as we have seen in the previous section, by the separation between nationals and non-nationals as the organising principle of society, by considering the migrant as an expellable person, and by perceiving them as a "tolerable threat" only if their presence is temporary and justified by work.

As will be explained in the next section, according to this perspective, temporary migration programmes are not only governed by these ideological principles (as is the rest of migration policy) but are also the migration control mechanism that has gone furthest in its application.

4. Temporary Migration Programmes: The Utopia of State Thought Made Reality

There are various terminologies used to refer to temporary migration programmes (TMPs), such as "Guest worker programs" or "Temporary worker programs", in addition to the specific names that each state gives to its own programmes, such as Spain's collective management of recruitment at origin (GECCO) or Germany's Gastarbeiter programme.

Although each specific TMP has its own particularities and there are various differentiated mechanisms among them, they all share a series of common logics. Essentially, they consist of importing foreign workers to cover labour force needs in specific sectors. The main restriction of the permits they receive consists of the strict temporary nature of their residence, to which, in many cases, other restrictions are added, such as not being able to bring their families, not being able to change their work sector (usually not even their employer) or there being no legal possibilities of converting the permits into others that are less restrictive or that could allow for long-term residence (Triandafyllidou 2022).

Although they have been used (mainly by the states at the core of the world-system) in many sectors, the most enduring historically and most common today are those employing migrant workers in agriculture. This has to do mainly with two elements: it is a sector whose seasonal nature is very well adapted to these mechanisms and where there is also a chronic need for cheap labour (Molinero-Gerbeau and Avallone 2016).

The vast majority of research in this field places the Bracero programme (Mandeel 2014), established in 1942 between the United States and Mexico, as the pioneer of these mechanisms. However, temporary or seasonal labour migration is a practice that can be found much further back in time, not only informally, for example, with the Andalusian day labourer routes in the 19th and early 20th centuries in Spain, but also in some cases formally (state-controlled) as shown by the Preußische Feldarbeiter Zentrale programme in East Prussia in 1891 (Achón 2014).

Fruit of the global capitalist system and driven by the living labour needs of global value chains (Molinero-Gerbeau and Avallone 2016), the TMPs have been the privileged mechanism for states to overcome the contradiction exposed by Sayad between the needs of capital and state thought. The labour is needed, but the migrant is not wanted. They are "undesirably desired" (Gertel and Sippel 2014, p. 247), so states constructed TMPs

intending to eliminate the "negative effects" of immigration and only retain the advantages they can bring. In his work, Sayad does not discuss the TMP mechanism itself, but his metaphor of the Ferris wheel refers directly to them (Sayad 2004b).

In his analysis of Algerian migration to France, Sayad (2004b) identified three ages, defining the first as an "orderly emigration". He explained that Algerian peasants first migrated to France as a "test bench" (Sayad 2004b, p. 33). It was a seasonal type of migration, marked by the agricultural calendar and limited by it. At the end of the harvest period, migrants returned to France to start this movement again the following year. This constant rotation of workers, which was highly supervised by the state both at the time of departure and during their stay and return, constantly renewed a process that is now referred to as circular migration. For Sayad, this circulation refers to the movement of a wheel that constantly turns but never stops. Migrants, being temporary, do not disturb the moral, political and social order of the host country because they constantly circulate, and in turn, "the host society is convinced that it will always have at its disposal workers [...] without having to pay the price (or too high a price) in terms of social problems" (Sayad 2004b, p. 31). According to Sayad, this Ferris wheel exerts a strong, seductive power as it convinces both the host and the migrant of the temporariness of the situation. Thus, despite the fact that stays may be repeated over long periods of years, each one is perceived as a new migration, generating in both parties the idea of a "perpetual process of replenishment" (Sayad 2004b, p. 30).

Sayad's Ferris wheel refers directly to the circularity induced by today's TMPs in a mechanism directly justified by state thinking. TMPs allow the state total control over the individual, his body and mobility by being present at every migration stage. Thus, unlike other types of migration models, such as general labour routes for foreigners or even irregular migration, the state monitors and ensures that it knows at all times where these foreign bodies that have penetrated its territory are.

If for state thought the ideal migrant would be a machine with an integral system of levers (Sayad 1991b), the TMPs come as close as possible to this idea by limiting the migrant's presence only for the time that the needs of work impose, denying him the right to come with his family and keeping him excluded from any contact with the host society. In other words, the migrant in the TMPs exists exclusively for work, outside of which there is no room for developing any other facet of human life.

When Sayad describes the housing conditions of Algerian workers in France in his paper "le foyer des sans-famille" (1991a), he describes them as places adapted to their function as workers, being no more than a place to sleep. "Temporary resident by definition, the immigrant can only be housed provisionally; poor worker, he can only be housed poorly" (Sayad 1991a, p. 85). However, Sayad describes the situation of workers who can potentially settle for life in France but who, through the illusion of the provisional, are kept in an emergency housing situation. In this case, state thought must create an illusion to justify such a situation (Gil-Araujo 2025), whereas the TMPs go further by sparing the state of this work. By guaranteeing per se the strict temporariness of the worker's presence, they can be temporarily housed without any trickery, a fact commonly found in the TMPs, mainly in agriculture.

This is not the only benefit that TMPs offer. With the development of neoliberal capitalism, both States and International Organisations have reinforced their interest in TMPs in a context where variable capital (labour) is the only factor in the productive process over which employers and States have control (Molinero-Gerbeau and Avallone 2016; García and Décosse 2014). By guaranteeing the procurement of cheap labour in a flexible and controlled manner, they effectively respond to economic needs in a way consistent with state thought. In their promotion, they have been presented as an alternative to more

traditional forms of migration and have sought to reinforce the idea that they produce a 'triple win', i.e., a triple gain for the host state, the state of origin and the migrant himself (López-Sala 2016). However, the need for labour and control is the real reason behind their design (Molinero-Gerbeau and Avallone 2016).

Numerous authors question the altruistic or mutually beneficial character of the programmes. Stephen Castles, for example, argued that they were "based on the inferiority and the separation of the foreigner. Western European societies did not integrate immigrants as equals but as economically disadvantaged and racially discriminated minorities" (Castles 2006, p. 743). In TMPs, workers' rights and freedoms are severely limited as they live in spaces completely separate from the cities and are under the control of employers at every step they take, both on and off the job (Fudge 2022). They are "wanted but not welcome" (Décosse 2017). Their labour force is wanted at a low cost, but they are not wanted any more than necessary to step out of their subordinate role.

The TMPs allow the state to avoid having to invent fallacies with regard to the migration process. The illusion of temporariness (Gil-Araujo 2025) is not required because the migrants' situation is strictly temporary here. Both the host society and the migrant himself know that their presence in the destination territory has a deadline, so neither integration is necessary, nor is it necessary to produce collective illusions about the temporariness of a status which, in this case, is guaranteed.

This lack of veils on the situation of migrants in TMPs also brings another set of situations. Here, not only is their presence justified by the work, but they must also perform at a level that satisfies the employers. Otherwise, they may face a series of punishments. In the TMPs, the migrant must perform like a machine, not just like any machine, but like an oiled and 100% functional machine. Low productivity delegitimises the migrant's presence in the eyes of the employer. Once again, the TMPs are the perfect utopia for state thought because it is no longer a question of the foreigner's presence having a motive but rather that he must work at full capacity if he does not want to receive one of the possible punishments, ranging from daily disqualification to non-renewal of the contract for the following season, or deportation. The availability of these instruments for employers allows them to increasingly intensify the pace of production (Rogaly 2008) and even to circumvent the law since the presence of foreigners depends on their will, and they have the power to establish informal agreements that extend working hours and reduce wages outside of what is established by law (Décosse 2017). Although they are formally legal workers, the mechanisms of discipline and productivity control common in TMPs generate numerous situations of exploitation (Ruiz Ramírez et al. 2024).

For Sayad, the nexus between migration and colonialism is very clear, as today's migrants come from former colonies and carry with them the weight of the material and symbolic domination historically exercised by the metropolises (Gil-Araujo 2010). Understanding that a fundamental characteristic of the colonised is to have been denied their political and historical national being (Sayad 2010d), Sayad says that migrants reproduce the colonial scheme because not only are they prevented from participating in politics due to their condition as non-nationals, but they are also forced not to do so in order not to generate fear. State thought forces the migrant to be neutral by allowing them to be present only for their economic function; a forced depoliticisation is imposed on them, just as in colonial systems.

> "immigration is politically neutralised, stripped of its political nature by the extreme technification to which it is subjected: it is no longer an instrument, a technique at the service of the labour and, more broadly, at the service of the economy; it is nothing more than an economic datum that has only an economic function" (Sayad 2010a, p. 271)

Again, in this respect, TMPs reveal state thought at its most refined. One of the aspects most highlighted by those who have carried out case studies on the TMPs implemented in various countries is usually the deliberate construction of these mechanisms to prevent the organisation of workers and guarantee their discipline. In some cases, this has been explicit, for example, in the US Bracero programme, which directly prohibited the right to strike and sanctioned any collective or individual action with the deportation of the workers involved (Mandeel 2014). In other cases, while formally, the right to organise is protected by law, employers (in collusion with states) have resorted to techniques such as blacklisting those who have participated in protests. This is the case in the Canadian SAWP programme, where it was demonstrated by the courts that these practices were carried out to prevent the re-employment of those workers who were considered to be fractious the following year (Vosko 2016). In other cases, as in the Huelva programme (Spain), for example, the flexibility available to employers to decide when work ends and, therefore, who and when to return has also been used as a tool to expel anyone suspected of organising any protest.

> "Although workers are formally in a legal situation and protected by labour legislation, it is difficult to assert their rights as any denunciation exposes them to the risk of having to return home, of not having their contract renewed or of slipping into clandestineness". (Hellio 2014, p. 151)

There is undoubtedly a variable geometry in each TMP's micro aspects and mechanisms as they respond to their own political, historical and social reality. However, the categories analysed are not only always present in their functioning but also make up the block of ideas that are at the origin of their design: marking a clear separation between nationals and non-nationals, imposing a strictly temporary residence, controlling their mobility, rotating their presence and reducing workers to a robotic role. In other words, to translate state thought into a utopia of migration control and utilitarianism.

5. Conclusions

If, as Sayad said, migration is the phenomenon that makes state thought emerge (Raimondi 2016), then it can be affirmed that TMPs are the migratory mechanism that makes it most visible and that has gone furthest in its political application. The high level of involvement that their design and application by states require, as well as the flagrant denial of rights and the recurrent application of deportation that they imply, led many academics in the 1970s to consider that TMPs were only viable in authoritarian states (Castles 2006). However, their global proliferation, primarily in the states at the core of the capitalist world-system, reveals that their implementation is not about political systems but state form. Wherever there is a state, there will be borders and migration control, thus, state thought (Sayad 2004a). As such, TMPs are not incompatible with democracy but rather are functional to state organisation since what is incompatible with democracy, according to Sayad, is the state itself (Raimondi 2016).

Unlike other channels of entry and other mechanisms for regulating migration, the TMPs imply the implementation of the utopia of state control over migration. They are guided by state thought as an ideology in the same way as the rest of state migration policy, but their extreme control and surveillance of migrants, their lack of need to produce collective illusions about their situation, and their extreme conversion of workers into virtual machines, allow to affirm that they are the most refined embodiment of state thought.

Finally, despite the strict control of the TMPs, migrants are not passive and submissive entities that are forced to acquiesce to an authoritarian system. The TMPs also offer certain possibilities that migrants take advantage of as a strategy to achieve their personal projects within the limits of their rigid structure. Some of the strategies that can be identified include obtaining income to develop their life projects with greater resources in their states

of origin, escaping from the programmes and becoming irregular, or aspiring to achieve more permanent residence in the destination state after several stays (Molinero-Gerbeau 2018). This is not trivial, for without understanding the goals migrants set for themselves, the migration process as a whole cannot be understood. Disregarding the agency of migrants from the analysis, in the eyes of Sayad (Raimondi 2016), makes it partial, as it implies reproducing colonial schemes by denying the protagonist of migration his own history. We can begin to break away from state thought by analysing the migration process from an integral perspective, as Sayad proposes throughout his work.

Institutional Review Board Statement: Not applicable.

Informed Consent Statement: Not applicable.

Data Availability Statement: Not applicable.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflicts of interest.

Abbreviations

The following abbreviations are used in this manuscript:

TMP   Temporary Migration Programme

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