

BOOK REVIEWS



AGIER, MICHEL. *Borderlands: Towards an Anthropology of the Cosmopolitan Condition*. 186 pp. Malden MA: Polity Press, 2016.

With *Borderlands*, renowned French anthropologist Michel Agier makes an important contribution to a number of fields: migrant and refugee studies in anthropology; ongoing critical self-reflections in the discipline; philosophical and political theories of globalization; moral and political debates on the refugee crisis. Everyone interested in these issues should read this book, all the more since Agier manages to weave these different perspectives into a coherent argument for an anthropology able to meet the challenges of the contemporary world.

Such an anthropology, Agier argues, cannot be grounded anymore in 'identity-based thought' that conceives of individuals and groups in terms of essential cultural, ethnic or national identities. Instead, we must acknowledge the fact that the human condition is one of existential homelessness, that human emplacement, as Agier puts it, is not possible without a concomitant displacement. At the very least, if it doesn't genuinely produce existential homelessness, the contemporary world brings this condition irrefutably to our awareness, and particularly in the lives of displaced persons and populations. Migrants, immigrants and refugees embody a new, an 'ordinary' cosmopolitanism that concerns us all because it is nothing more nor less than a dramatic manifestation of a universal manner of being-in-this-world. Displaced persons dwell in in-between spaces, like encampments, camps and squats; they exist in a liminal time that, as it extends longer, becomes a permanent state in which they have to make themselves 'at home', creating an everyday life under conditions of existential uncertainty. It is this stabilization of the condition of displacement that makes the cosmopolitanism of the migrant and the refugee 'ordinary' and sets it apart from academic discourses on globalization. The ordinary cosmopolitanism of the refugee is a lived, existential reality, not a theme of detached reflection.

To do justice to the exemplary status of the displaced individual in the contemporary world, anthropology has to move the phenomenon of the border to the centre of attention. Refugees and migrants, and ultimately all of us, are border dwellers, our subjectivity emerging in movements of resistance against and divergence from essentialist identities assigned to us by others in the public, political sphere. In the absence of fixed identities, the contemporary subject is 'decentred' and its emergence must occur in concrete contexts, through performances in specific situations, and anthropology must consequently become situational anthropology.

Grounding this new anthropological paradigm is an extension of the concept of 'border' from its usual spatial sense to include all situations characterized by

spatial, temporal and social indeterminacy. Borders are, in Agier's view, an original expression of the human capacity to constitute meaning in the world. In the same process of separating individuals and groups from each other, they also connect them, putting them in relation to each other and allowing for movements between them. Understood thus, borders are the opposites of walls, whose significance consists in a rejection of the relationship to the other.

The book is divided into two parts comprising three chapters each: Part I presenting basic concepts, outlining the argument and placing it in context; Part II focusing on the methodological, empirical and theoretical questions of an anthropology of border situations. Following a concise introduction containing an exposition of the book's thesis, Chapter 1, 'The elementary forms of the border,' lays out the extended concept of border just referred to. Chapter 2, 'The world as problem,' gives a portrayal of the contemporary political world from the perspective of displaced populations. Nation-states, Agier asserts, respond with 'indigenization' to the perceived threat of the 'alien immigrant,' resorting to an essentialist thought and rhetoric that closes 'one's own' off from 'the other' in absolute terms. The proliferation of border walls since the end of the cold war are the physical and symbolic manifestation of this denial of relationship, of a border politics that often amounts to a form of war against the other, personified in the migrant. Chapter 3, 'Border dwellers and borderlands,' provides examples for the ordinary, or banal cosmopolitanism lived by increasing numbers of displaced people. Drawing on his own research experience in various regions of the world, Agier distinguishes the wanderer, the pariah, and the *métèque* (from the antique-Greek concept of *metoikos*, 'resident without civil rights') as different figures of the migrant. These figures are not to be understood as representing concrete individuals, but as types of displaced existence that are realized in individuals' lives to different degree and in varying accentuations.

Opening Part II of the book, entitled 'The decentred subject,' Chapter 4 is concerned with 'Questions of method.' Here, Agier engages in the critical discussion of the notion of a 'great divide' between anthropology and the societies it studies. In the contemporary context, such a divide between the 'modern' and the 'exotic' has become obviously absurd, as the intertwining of the global and the local is observable everywhere in the world. Agier argues that the traditional 'cultural decentring' through anthropological fieldwork must be accompanied by an 'epistemological decentring,' a questioning of anthropology's own perspective on the basis of anthropological experience. In terms of method, decentring in anthropology must focus on border situations which, by virtue of an absence of a core or centre of identity, are conceptualized as sites of decentring. The anthropologist inserts him- or herself into these situations in a 'pragmatic posture,' paying attention to context, 'processes, conditions, forms and effects of the observed dynamics' (p. 104), instead of searching for absolute, unchanging, cultural and ethnic identities. Chapter 5 discusses how such identity-thinking haunts the meaning and use of concepts such

as 'civilization', 'culture' and 'race', both in anthropology and politics. Agier traces the term 'civilization' back to its origins, as a form of symbolic demarcation from and violence against the other in colonial contexts. Similarly, racism is presented as a radical response occurring in precisely that moment in which the system it justifies ideologically (i.e. slavery) is threatened in its existence. The concept of culture, finally, and of the persona as a representative of 'cultural identity', shows itself as completely inadequate for the task of explaining the complex references between local cultural practices and global contexts, as they are established, for example, by Afro-Brazilian carnival groups when they present themselves as part of the 'African Diaspora.' Such practices, Agier argues, call for a different 'logics and politics of the subject', as he titles his final chapter. Agier here critically engages with different subject conceptions, especially with Foucault's dual notion of the subject as emerging from subjugation to power through disciplines, and, intertwined with the former, care of the self. Agier holds that this conception doesn't account properly for the relationality of the self, and therefore needs to be complemented by the concept of a subject-in-situation. The subject can emerge as an 'other-subject' through a refusal to perform the identities assigned to it in a particular situation, as when refugees protest against their categorization by different degrees of vulnerability. This other-subject becomes the specific focus of an anthropology of border situations.

Borderlands is a rewarding, but by no means an easy read. The language is dense, complex, and sometimes quite abstract, probably partly due to translation issues, partly a reflection of concerns specific to the French anthropological tradition. The ethnographic vignettes and case studies appear schematic at times, as if their only purpose was to illustrate the theoretical point, which seems a little odd in a book stressing the importance of events and performances. More detailed and evocative case studies would also have had the added benefit of giving a clearer idea of what a situational anthropology would look like, and how it would differ concretely from already existing anthropologies. With regard to previous anthropological practices and scholarship, Agier sometimes seems to overstate his case, as probably do all innovators. In my opinion, his emphasis on what happens concretely in a situation has a lot of affinity with existing anthropological concepts of performance and performativity. Explorations of these connections could produce a more sophisticated conceptual apparatus to describe the emergence of subjectivity in border situations. Much the same can be said about Agier's use of other bodies of literature. I was surprised to not see Georg Simmel mentioned anywhere, when he is generally credited with introducing the sociological topic of the stranger; Alfred Schütz is discussed as an example of a mid-twentieth century immigrant existence, but not as important theorist of the everyday life-world. I am convinced that a clearer formulation of the inner logic of ordinary cosmopolitanism could be won by interpreting border experiences from the perspective of Schütz's conception of structures of the life-world. Last among the conspicuous omissions in Agier's text, is

the French existentialist-phenomenological tradition, with its attempts to address the 'question of the other'. In the works of Sartre, Merleau-Ponty and Levinas, and in the development that these have received in the thought of Bernhard Waldenfels, much has been said about existential homelessness, and the relationality and liminality of self and other that are highlighted in Agier's essay.

It is hard to say, however, whether these comments highlight shortcomings of the argument, or whether they testify to its vigour, in that they point to directions it may be extended. Be that as it may, *Borderlands* presents a bold and original intervention on topics of central importance in our time, and deserves to be widely read.

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GABIAM, NELL. *The Politics of Suffering: Syria's Palestinian Refugee Camps*.

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The contests this book describes, surrounding material improvements in the built environment of a Palestinian refugee camp in pre-conflict Syria, are in one sense, tragically obsolete. Most Palestinians in the war-ravaged country have been displaced and are dependent upon humanitarian aid. At least 70 per cent of the population of the immense Damascene Yarmouk camp, portrayed by Gabiam as a thriving, distinctively Palestinian urban centre, has fled or been driven out, while the much smaller Ein al-Tal, a recently built camp and locus of Gabiam's ethnography, had its entire population expelled in 2013 by armed opposition groups. Moreover, Palestinians, who had been for so long part of Syria's national self-image as the vanguard of Arab resistance to Zionism, are now seen by some as a source of competition for scarce resources: 'The goods of the country for the people of the country', in the words of one slogan Gabiam reports.

Nevertheless, this text provides a fresh insight into some critically important processes, not least in the wake of mass movements of people at the current moment. It revolves around the following questions: how distinctive must Palestinian refugees be within their host countries if their status as people who still belong in Palestine – and are entitled to return to Palestine – is to be in no way diminished; and, how important is present hardship to this distinctiveness, alongside other markers such as location, particular Palestinian social configurations, political activism, the persistence of certain symbols, or internal, psychological memory?

Based on fieldwork mostly conducted at and since the turn of the century, *The Politics of Suffering* illuminates refugees' attempts to answer these questions by attending to the technocratic, political and humanitarian debates surrounding a proposal on the part of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA), the agency tasked with advancing Palestinian refugees' material interests, to renovate a refugee camp called Neirab near Aleppo.