



## Book Review

*Borderlands: Towards an Anthropology of the Cosmopolitan Condition.* By Michel Agier. Cambridge: Polity, 2016. ix, 186 pages. \$22.95, paperback.

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Michel Agier's book will be of interest to researchers and students from the fields of anthropology and sociology who have a penchant for theoretically informed approaches to migration studies, borderization, and globalization. The range of issues the book addresses — including borders/borderization processes, globalization, cosmopolitanism, the decentering of the human subject, and a detailed methodological critique of established approaches in anthropology — makes it an ambitious work. Agier's attempt to cover such a broad range of issues presents problems of its own, for while the author raises what are clearly critical questions for both migration studies and anthropology, he does not always manage to weave them together to present a coherent thesis. This lack of focus is only added to by his overuse of evocative language.

One of the main issues explored in the book is the creation and maintenance of "alterity" in a globalized, cosmopolitan world. The ontological security offered by the possession of a distinct identity, the book suggests, has been significantly eroded by the collapse of borders. Here, Agier refers not only to the physical places at the margins of national territories where administrative-judicial processes control the flow of people but also to the close proximity of an unlimited number of others through mass tourism, economic exchange, migration flows, and media images, processes which have eroded cultural borders and ushered in a new era

of cosmopolitanism where there is no outside, no foreignness, no other — no alterity. The "existential tremors" (56) resulting from this has fed the more recent populist passions for new borderization processes, with politicians ready to build new types of borders to re-mark the self from the other and, in the process, re-establish a sense of alterity. These borderization processes can take a physical form, such as the wall built to divide Israelis and Palestinians, the UN buffer zone dividing Greek and Turkish Cypriots, and the proposed wall along the Mexican-US border. Yet there has also been a multiplication of less tangible borders which are not located at the territorial margins of nation-states but exist at the level of day-to-day interactions. For Agier, the most important borders are no longer physical but relational — created and maintained by a strategic assertion of identity. This assertion has made borders ephemeral and ever-changing in nature, location, intensity, and shape, yet ever-present.

Agier is one of many to note the apparent contradiction which characterizes the present global context: the simultaneous processes of homogenization and particularization. In a world where the circulation of people, goods, images, and ideas has grown in intensity so as to negate the very idea of foreignness, aggressive discourses of identity have come to dominate the political field, producing calls for "ever more walls in a world without alterity" (85). While these are interesting observations and contain much truth about the contemporary world, the thesis that alterity no longer exists is a very strong claim, and one which Agier needs to substantiate much more convincingly.

These conclusions lead the author into an interesting but well-trodden methodological discussion of different approaches toward identity within anthropology: essentialist, culturalist, and situational. Rejecting the first two approaches for falling into an "identitarian trap," Agier's thesis on the relational aspects of

contemporary borderization processes leads him to adopt a more situational approach, although one informed by a cultural, epistemological, and political decentering of the subject which takes account of the globalized context of which individuals are clearly conscious in their daily interactions. The intention here is to underline that identity is not an essentialist characteristic of an individual, nor is it a construct dependent on a particular cultural context, but instead, an ensemble of strategic assertions which interpellate certain collective or individual responses which must be investigated "in situation." Such investigations must take account of dynamic processes, conditions, forms, and effects to enable us to understand the "why and the how of the procedures that leads certain persons or

collectivities, at a given moment, to use this or that so-called "identitarian language" (95). By using this method, Agier argues, anthropologists will better understand the responses of those who find themselves in border situations: refugees in semi-permanent camps who adopt different identities depending on which NGO or governmental agency they encounter, migrants in host societies, and the "I/us" when encountering those from beyond our national borders.

While a stimulating and intellectually challenging read, there is nothing essentially new in Agier's *Borderlands*. His main contribution is to raise some interesting methodological observations that could provide a framework for future studies of borders, borderization processes, and migration.