



HAL
open science

Göpfert, Mirco: Policing the Frontier: An Ethnography of Two Worlds in Niger, 'Police/Worlds: Studies in Security, Crime, and Governance' series. 192 pp., Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press 2020, ISBN: 9781501747229.

Paul Grassin

► **To cite this version:**

Paul Grassin. Göpfert, Mirco: Policing the Frontier: An Ethnography of Two Worlds in Niger, 'Police/Worlds: Studies in Security, Crime, and Governance' series. 192 pp., Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press 2020, ISBN: 9781501747229.. Zeitschrift für Ethnologie (ZfE) / Journal of Social and Cultural Anthropology (JSCA), 2021, 146, pp.257-260. hal-03943729

HAL Id: hal-03943729

<https://hal.science/hal-03943729>

Submitted on 9 Feb 2023

HAL is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

Copyright

Göpfert, Mirco: *Policing the Frontier: An Ethnography of Two Worlds in Niger*, 'Police/Worlds: Studies in Security, Crime, and Governance' series.
192 pp., Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press 2020, ISBN: 9781501747229.

Mirco Göpfert belongs to a generation of young scholars who, from the mid-2000s, greatly contributed to documenting the routines of state police work in Africa through an in-depth ethnographic methodology. Partly drawing on the 'states at work' research program initiated in the late 1990s by Thomas Bierschenk, Jean-Pierre Olivier de Sardan and Giorgio Blundo (2004; 2006; 2014), they rediscovered the day-to-day functioning of public policing institutions that had long remained outside the interests of the social sciences. *Policing the frontier* must be read and appreciated as part of this emerging field of studies in relation to the author's past collaborations with some of these scholars.

Mirco Göpfert's book focuses on the day-to-day interactions between the gendarmes and the general public in Niger and places them within their social, historical and institutional contexts. The discussion is structured around the notion of the frontier, which designates the tension, inherent in police work, between 'bureaucratic form' and social 'life' (p. 141). Inspired by Veena Das and Deborah Poole's concept of the 'margins' of the state, the frontier refers to both a space 'between life governed by public institutions and life outside of the state's grasp' (p. 9) and the project to extend this grasp. At the frontier, different moral and legal registers emanating from these two worlds 'collide and merge at the same time' (p. 140). As such, this is a space where uncertainty prevails, where excessive arbitrariness and rigidity can easily arise, but which also favours local arrangements, innovation and creativity. It is on this second aspect of the frontier that the book largely focuses. In that sense, as the author shows, what is at stake in policing the frontier is largely about the application, 'repairing' or suspension of the law. Its reality lies somewhere between the 'state of exception', when cases are reduced to 'bare text' in order to defend the law from the influence of social norms, and the 'exception of the state', when people and situations are reduced to 'bare life' to 'protect them *from* the law' (p. 123).

The author proposes to tackle this set of questions by studying the routine work of a fictional gendarmerie brigade located in Godiya, the fictional capital of a rural department not far from the Nigerien border. The brigade is a paragon of the dozen brigades and administrative units across Niger that Göpfert visited during his eighteen months of fieldwork between 2009 and 2014. Nonetheless, the handful of gendarmes in this brigade and all the very detailed situations in which the demonstration is grounded are all real and come from his different research sites. Even though it helps in guaranteeing the gendarmes' anonymity, reminding us of the difficulties involved in conducting and publishing research within such an uncertain institutional environment, one can nonetheless regret that such a 'narrative strategy' (p. 14) may also result in erasing the specifics of each local context and their influence on police work.

The book comprises three parts and nine chapters, each discussing a specific dimension of policing (at) the frontier. Chapters two and three complete the introductory part by exploring the historicity of the Nigerien gendarmerie and describing its concrete presence in rural areas. Chapter two combines second-hand sources with archives and first-hand testimonies. It provides important thoughts on the centrality of the 'frontier project' across the gendarmerie's history. Gendarmes and their predecessors first served as a military force to push forward and maintain both the territorial frontiers and, later on, the 'bureaucratic frontier' of the state (p. 35), thereby contributing to the discipline and legibility of the internal population. Purely narrative, chapter three describes some of the central aspects of the gendarmes' uneven presence in rural areas, which appear more salient in the difficult handling of an exceptional murder.

Chapters four, five and six form the second part of the book, which concentrates on the 'bureaucratic form' of the gendarmes' work. Focusing on the gendarmes' 'senses', these chapters reveal crucial aspects of police work in Africa that have so far remained understudied. Chapter four highlights the orality in police work. The gendarmes' 'bureaucratically attuned ear' (p. 60) reorders the stories people tell them into 'criminal' and 'civil' categories and then decide what to do about them. But the process reveals the uncertainty of these legal dichotomies, as it is based on the gendarmes' personal and moral appreciation of the gravity of an offence. Chapter five addresses the problem of gendarmes' access to the knowledge of citizens and crime in what is a vast and largely unknown terrain. Despite recent expenditure on 'high-tech surveillance' to fight terrorism, the state's capacity 'to make society legible' (p. 62) is not only poor but also inaccessible to local gendarmes. Göpfert then suggests that the actual capacity of the state to maintain social order lies greatly in the gendarmes' ability to maintain reciprocal relations with 'knowledge brokers'. The chapter discusses the strategic and moral implications of their relations with personal informants, and the chiefs as influential power-holders, friends and acquaintances. Chapter six focuses on the aesthetic dimension of the gendarmes' writing of 'procès-verbaux', which vertically circulate through the state apparatus and constitute one of the major ways through which their work is evaluated by both their peers and their superiors. He argues that the definition of a positive professional identity, articulated around both bureaucratic and intellectual values, is at stake in the dedication and pride they put into the fabrication of 'beautiful' documents, combining bureaucratic rigour with creativity.

The last three chapters explore the gendarmes' adaptive practices to the expectations of the different audiences they interact with and whom they all try to please: the public, the prosecutors, and their superiors, who answer to the authorities. Chapters seven and eight go more deeply into their day-to-day arrangements with civilians who seek their help to settle their disputes in the form of restorative justice, while avoiding the uncertainties and complexities of the judicial system. Agreeing to handle civil cases (Chapter seven) or to settle criminal charges through informal arrangements (Chapter eight), the gendarmes circumvent the law and adapt to popular conceptions of offences and justice. Apart from their financial interest in 'assisting' the people, their

motivation lies in the restoration of 'peace' between the disputants, between themselves and the civilians, and within the larger community (p. 108). Therefore, rather than simply compensating the victim and punishing the offenders, the gendarmes also use their bureaucratic authority and the threat of legal procedure to frame the disputants' mediation and help them establish a consensus within which every party can save face. However, these arrangements, being outside legal procedure, expose the gendarmes to severe backlash if, after closing a case, one dissatisfied party complains to their superiors. Chapter nine therefore addresses the gendarmes' frustration with and adaptation to the uncertainties of their lives and careers, which are at the mercy of both powerful civilians' and their superiors' unpredictable desires and actions. Caught in this 'bureaucratic limbo' (p. 126), they have to maintain patron-client relationships with all of them, in which the distribution of money plays a central part.

In a nutshell, the book provides a very detailed, sensitive and well-written ethnographic account of the day-to-day negotiation of policing between the population, state agents and their superiors in a context in which the state has only a limited capacity to enforce the law. However, its observations are not limited to the Nigerien or African contexts alone. As the author convincingly argues, the frontier runs across the state apparatus as a whole: everywhere in the world, 'bureaucrats work in that frontier space' and have to juggle between the 'abstract norms that guide and sanction their actions' and 'the concreteness of practical reality' (p. 141). For that matter, it makes an important contribution to the study of the state in Africa and beyond.

Through extensive interaction with classical studies of police work in other countries, Mirco Göpfert proves 'what an "anthropological criminology" may have to offer to broader criminological debates about crime, punishment, and the application of the law' (p. 122). To that extent, the promises are fully satisfied. But it is also where the perspective adopted in the book encounters its limits. Admittedly, the author argues that 'this book does not focus on policing as a mode of governance from the outset and certainly not as a means of enforcing unequal social order in the name of public security' but instead 'examines policing primarily as *work*' (p. 5). Yet, as it aims at discussing the ambiguous and uneven tensions between the bureaucratic sphere and the social world, I suggest that some of its reflections could have gained from being rooted in a perspective that takes better account of the influence of social stratification and the political dimensions of policing.

First, the public policies that frame the gendarmes' mandate and those who promote them are largely missing. Certainly, considering policing primarily as 'work' greatly helps us depart from the normative vision of African police institutions that had long prevailed in the academic debate: as corrupt, absent from people's lives, politically oriented and mainly repressive. But it also seems to set aside central questions about relations between policing and the political sphere, which can conversely help us understand how the gendarmes perform their work. For example, the analysis of day-to-day policing would have gained from being better connected to the new democratic political context and the rising influence of human rights' groups, briefly evoked

in chapter two. Taking into account the new forms of pressure they have exerted on the gendarmes' work and careers could have brought new insights into the handling of criminals, the diversion of criminal cases away from the judicial system, and the gendarmes' relations with their superiors.

Second, while the bureaucratic world is thoroughly analysed, the social world sometimes seems to be treated as a black box: for example, the gendarmes' and their interlocutors' social backgrounds and trajectories remain largely unexplored. Nevertheless, as the sociology of state action has shown, 'popular ideas' of justice (p. 115), as well as the resources people can mobilise in their interactions with the gendarmes, may differ greatly from one social milieu to another. Moreover, as the author suggests, the gendarmes presented in the book form a group of 'idealists', less brutal and 'attuned to the sound of money' than others (p. 143). An analysis of their social trajectories, beyond a brief mention of their shared 'poor rural origins' (p. 112) with some of their interlocutors, could have helped explain their specificity and what pushes them to 'break [and repair] the law to be just' (p. 143).

These, I argue, constitute two avenues for future research that would draw on Mirco Göpfert's and others' critical rediscovery of the daily routine of African state-policing institutions.

Paul Grassin
University of Paris 1 Panthéon/Sorbonne
Centre Européen de Sociologie et de Science Politique