



Managing the Undesirables: Refugee Camps and Humanitarian Government, by Michel Agier

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*Managing the Undesirables:
Refugee Camps and Humanitarian
Government*
by Michel Agier

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Following early observations of the precarious living conditions of refugees in Bogotá in 1999, French anthropologist Michel Agier visited numerous refugee camps in Africa (e.g. Zambia, Kenya, Liberia, Sierra Leone and Guinea), as well as the West Bank, from 2000 to 2007. Looking behind the screen of protection and rescue, his rich ethnographic study of refugee camps unravels how humanitarian intervention borders on control and policing, thus participating in a political strategy that closes the gate of a safer and healthier world to others, deemed undesirables. According to Agier, a partition is increasingly emerging between two world categories: ‘On the one hand, a clean, healthy and visible world; on the other, the world’s residual “remnants”, dark, diseased and invisible’ (p.4). By scrutinizing the complex mechanisms of control over extra-territorial spaces and some populations, Agier seeks to put in relief the ambiguity of what he calls the ‘Humanitarian Government’. Thus, he asserts that there exists a functional solidarity ‘between [the] humanitarian world (the hand that cares) and the police and military ordering (the hand that strikes)’ (p.5).

Agier is both an anthropologist and an important actor of *Médecins Sans Frontières* (he was elected to the executive council of

MSF-France in 2004 and 2007). Therefore, his ethnographic study is an investigation between terrain and theory; *Managing the Undesirables* seeks to offer a radical critique of both the foundations of humanitarian action and its political effects. In doing so, Agier seeks to assert whether a critical commitment to humanitarian action is still possible.

In the first part of this comparative study, the book explores the genesis of the 'humanitarian government' by examining how a function of control gradually came to accompany that of protection within the frame of the 1951 Geneva Convention. Rather than taking categories (e.g. refugee) for granted, Agier unravels the violent production of categories and statistics which produce specific modalities of recognition. The increasingly complex and diversified management of the undesirables, in terms of spaces of containment and categories, required the combined forces of police and humanitarian action. Finally, the study places UN and other NGO-led refugee camps in a broader context of containment and circulation. Whilst encampment has become a preferred solution for the UNHCR, other social phenomena (e.g. self-settled informal camps or detention centres) bear similarities with refugee camps.

The second part of this study provides detailed ethnographic case studies exploring everyday life in refugee camps, such as Dadaab in Kenya. The author describes how life in the camps is characterized by a state of permanent precariousness and an enduring present. Indeed, despite a rhetoric of urgency which calls for immediate actions to quickly change the living conditions of the migrants, humanitarian action implements a state of perpetual emergency which does not deliver a radical change. As the manifestation of an immediate present the camp 'excludes both past and present' (p.79).

These extra-territorial spaces are then the loci of a different regime of government and rights manoeuvred by NGOs. However, as observed by Agier,

beyond the legal and political exceptionality, real life is constructed in the camps as a social life that is largely resilient, and in its own way, also transformative (p.86).

Indeed, the book's most valuable contribution to migration studies is a shift of emphasis from displacement to emplacement and an examination of how refugee camps can be the loci of hybrid socialization and innovative political mobilization despite the surrounding violence. The (constrained) agency of refugees as actors and authors, and not mere vulnerable refugees in need of contained protection, is at the centre of this comparative study. Finally, in the third part, Agier provides some challenging reflections on the three themes which permeate his study: camps as towns in the making; humanitarianism as a social world and regime of thoughts; the workings of humanitarian government.

Agier's analysis of humanitarian action and the resulting biopolitical apparatus that controls refugees is crucial at a time when camps and detention centres multiply in a context of economic crisis and ideological retreat. In itself, the anthropology of these spaces of exclusion is a matter of pressing urgency. Thus, the translation of this book into English will surely spark fruitful debates with Anglophone social scientists. It has become a cliché that Francophone and Anglophone social scientists largely work in ignorance of each other's work. Unfortunately, Agier seems to be unaware of a growing body of similar work by Anglophone scholars such as De Genova (2002) and Willen (2007) who, examining clandestine

migrants' illegality as a set of juridical, socio-political and phenomenological statuses, focus on complex power struggles in which migrants are not mere victims despite their exclusion. The theoretical and ethnographic contributions of these studies are essential to an examination of the status of refugee and the constrained agency of migrants in camps.

Although he refers to his work, Agier fails to clarify his position regarding Agamben and the concept of bare life in a state of exception (see Agamben, 1998). Indeed, Agier's emphasis on refugees' agency contrasts with scholars influenced by Agamben (i.e. Rajaram & Grundy-Warr, 2004) who only account for the spatial and social exclusion of migrants. Agier's theoretical stance would benefit from being more clearly articulated vis-à-vis this influential theorist in migration studies.

As a critique of humanitarian action, *Managing the Undesirables* does not fail to provide insightful observations and anecdotes about the dialogical nature of ethnography and the disturbances caused by conducting research in a setting controlled by hegemonic NGOs. In doing so, Agier also has the intellectual honesty to make clear his professional involvement with MSF. The study is also illustrated by numerous and insightful ethnographic vignettes, albeit drawn from the author's limited (a few weeks to three months) periods of fieldwork.

However, this comparative study does not intend to offer a deep analysis of each refugee camp. Rather, these ethnographic vignettes illustrate some of the themes tackled within this broad study of humanitarian action in refugee camps and, ultimately, constitute an earnest invitation to anthropologists and other scholars for more long-term and in-depth monographs of refugee camps.

Similarly, this study does not amount to a blueprint but nevertheless present practitioners with challenging questions which are intended to spark reflection, not provide definitive answers.

Thus, *Managing the Undesirables* comprises a crucial and original contribution to the analysis of refugee camps and humanitarian action. As such, it is a vital read for students and scholars interested in issues pertaining to exile and displacement as well as NGO practitioners.

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