

***Borders, Asylum and Global Non-Citizenship: The Other Side of the Fence***  
by Heather L. Johnson, Cambridge: Cambridge  
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With changing notions of space, borders, and nation, global migration needs to be re-evaluated and re-conceptualized in today's Social and Political Studies. This is the primary objective of Heather L. Johnson's *Borders, Asylum and Global Non-Citizenship. The Other Side of the Fence*. The book is concerned with the meaning of irregular migration, and foregrounds how transnational mobility and migration are important forces of social change. Johnson is a Lecturer in Politics and International Studies at Queens University in Belfast. From this disciplinary perspective, the broadening of International Relations Studies beyond the mere analysis of the forms and functions of migration policy in current nation-states is evidenced in Johnson's attempt to understand irregularity, as well as the relationship between homogenization and diversity through the anthropological and ethnographical lens of field research in three locations: refugee camps in Tanzania, detention centers in Australia and border zones of the Spanish cities of Ceuta and Melilla, both exclaves in Morocco. Geographically

and politically, these “sites of intervention” are situated in areas representing the “global South,” the “global North” and border zones between them. The three different locations exemplify how the lived experience of the migrant and state migration policy, or the local and the global, conflict with each other: “They are spaces within which global discourses of border protection and humanitarianism collide with specific mobilities and technologies that govern them” (p. 15). Johnson does not want to systematically compare these sites; instead, through the detailed, geographically separate analysis of migrant narratives, the author offers local views on the global regime of international migration.

In the enlightening introduction, “Situating Migrant Narratives In Irregularity,” Johnson offers a lucid rationale for the book’s interdisciplinary focus on irregularity in global migration. The central arguments made here repeatedly serve as pivotal points in the interpretation and contextualization of global non-citizenship in the other eight chapters. The book’s central interest lies how Johnson shows that “the agency of non-citizens is controlled through border practices and the spaces of exception that exist at global borders” (p. 1). The central concept of “irregularity” most often refers to “illegal migration,” but Johnson expands its range to those migrants who do not bend to the categorizations shaped by the state. Irregular migrants do not conform to official state dictates as they challenge the sovereign power of the state to define its territory as the only legitimate political space and, correspondingly, assert citizenship as the sole status enabling political agency. In refusing to participate in a repatriation program or staying beyond the terms of a visa, they become irregular.

The irregular migrant is conceived of “as a powerful actor engaged in shaping the politics of migrations” (p. 3). Johnson’s keen interest in the personal narratives of individual migrants and her acknowledgment of the interviewees as real persons with their own projects and conceptions of migration shows how irregularity is an experiential concept, not only a

policy status or a specific kind of mobility. In doing so, she stresses the agency and voice of the subject and conceives the non-citizen as “a transgressive and disruptive figure in world politics” (p. 1). Often, in research on international migration, the migrant appears as an anonymous shadow on the otherwise sharply drawn framework of migration regulations (p. 2). As a counterpoint, *Borders, Asylum and Global Non-Citizenship* emphasizes that irregular migrants are actors in the procedures and dynamics of global migration. Indeed, Johnson convincingly analyzes the dynamics of irregularity from an international perspective, and makes a strong case for the active role migrants have in shaping the politics of migration. They use tactics to engage with the everyday life of irregularity, which may be transformative at the momentary level. Johnson highlights the political implications of the everyday lives of irregular migrants. Their acts of resistance are intimately political, whereas the detention centers in Australia, the camps in Tanzania, and the border zones of Ceuta and Melilla conversely aim at depoliticizing the aims and aspirations of migrants in trying to regulate them. The asymmetrical power relation between these two perspectives – the sovereign power of state policy and the individuals trying to circumvent this policy – represents the main focus of the study.

Without idealizing the potential of individual agency, she insists on the fact that macro-events of protest, or mass movements such as the current migration crisis, consist of a myriad of everyday micro-events: “It is this kind everyday activism that characterizes the activism of the marginalized [...]” (p. 200). This activism is ongoing both in acts of resistance and survival in individual quotidian life, as well as temporary in those moments of solidarity between citizens and non-citizens. In underlining the importance of the everyday and the momentary, she conceives a highly insightful theory of social change within the context of global migration. The author highlights how the paradigm of distinguishing between forced and voluntary migration, which has been

dominant since the end of the Second World War, is being supplemented by a new paradigm of irregular vs. regular migration (p. 205). This regime is characterized by an ever-shrinking space of asylum and migration. Johnson plausibly argues that the situation of irregularity is an existential one, signifying the subject's identity. Within the power structures of the nation-state to control borders, the status of irregularity "produces a temporariness that is felt to be permanent, and the instability and exclusion that follow create a sense of being static, unable to envision a future" (p. 106). Irregularity is presently being criminalized by an increasingly restrictive state policy, because migrants refuse to participate in official state programs.

Methodologically, Johnson uses anthropology, postcolonial studies and insights from feminism to build a careful brick-by-brick argument. In doing so, she offers a multidisciplinary complement to the often quantitatively oriented research in international relations. Her multidisciplinary qualitative methodology is informed by a wide array of theoretical approaches ranging from Giorgio Agamben (p. 131-133), over Gayatri Spivak (p. 26) and Sandro Mezzadra (p. 197), to Jacques Rancière (p. 186). This complex theoretical framework calls for an embrace of the emancipation in the alternative views of irregular migrants as they unmask the biases of the hegemonic discourse of contemporary migration policy. In this, the book comes full circle in its desire to chart new ground in the study of the modes and modalities of counter-hegemonic acts of individual resistance against the politics of containment. The ethical impetus of the research is brought to the fore by emphasizing "agency that begins from the exceptional space of the subaltern" (p. 69). Indeed, the postcolonial commitment to doing justice to the voice of the voiceless is clearly present in the work. In conventional understandings of power, this micro-politics of individual protest is rarely at the center of attention.

The combination of a broad canvas of empirical data with a sound and

well-tuned theoretical foundation most certainly contributes to the validity of Johnson's theses. She is crisply aware of her own presence and power position as scientific, and therefore did not want to record the interviews so as to avoid impeding the trust of the interviewees. They were given the opportunity to give their own directions to their interviews, and to voice their own reflections. Yet, since the voice of the non-citizen lies at the heart of this study, the reader may wonder why there are neither any direct quotations from the interviewees, nor any mention of their real names (a list of their false names is included in the appendix). Understandable though the method may be, by proceeding like this, the voice of the academic paradoxically risks gaining more weight and becoming central.

Overall, Heather L. Johnson's study is solidly argued and impressively well-documented. Throughout the monograph, she is attentive to the ideological paradoxes and complexities of migration. Indeed, her work unearths the contradictions and underlying tensions in present-day definitions and concepts of "irregular" migration. Moreover, her critical stance enables the dissonant voices of non-citizens to be heard. In doing so, she convincingly shows, through the narratives of non-citizens in Tanzania, Australia and the Spanish exclaves of Ceuta and Melilla in Morocco, how state policies of border control are marked by a profound tension between a politics of humanitarianism and protectionism: "Migrant narratives of mobility [...] tell of the gap between narratives of humanitarian concern for human rights and protection and the actual practices of border control" (p. 114).

The work conveys a deeper understanding of contemporary mass migration and the construction of nation-states based on inclusion and exclusion. It is an intellectually engaging scholarly work that opens up a vibrant space of interdisciplinary research, and should be regarded as a significant contribution to the discussion of irregular migrants, the politics of their individual acts of protest and their multiple identities. It

certainly sets an ambitious agenda for scholars working in the broader fields of International Relations, Sociology, Anthropology and Migration Studies. It will not, of course, end the debate over the ongoing dynamics and discussions of asylum and national borders, but the work provides deeper analysis, new insights and more balanced perspectives of what is, undeniably, a complex and important discussion. In its breadth and depth of knowledge, *Borders, Asylum and Global Non-Citizenship. The Other Side of the Fence* gives impulse to further investigation.