

***A Review of Policing the Frontier: An Ethnography of Two Worlds in Niger* by Micro Göpfert**

**Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2020, 175, pp.
ISBN: 9781501747229.**

**Bernard D. DiGregorio
Department of Sociology and Anthropology
West Virginia University
bdigrego@mix.wvu.edu**

Criminological research on policing has a long history, but to date, the bulk of the empirical and theoretical work in the field is urbanormative. What is more, the relatively limited research that has thus far been done on rural policing was conducted in the United States, Canada, Australia, and various western European countries situated in the Global North. Hence, Göpfert's offering is unique and sorely needed. More specifically, *Policing the Frontiers* features his path-breaking study of the Nigerin gendarmerie, one of the many forms that policing takes in Niger. What also makes Göpfert's contribution novel is that he does not simply view policing as a means of social control or application of power, but rather as a form of bureaucratic work. He presents the gendarmerie as a group that stands on the frontier, both spatially and socially. Spatially, due to the fact that many of the areas where they work are rural in nature. Socially, because the individual gendarmes stand in two worlds, with one foot in the bureaucracy and the other with the people whom they serve and to whom they relate. To that end, Göpfert studies the gendarmerie and individual gendarmes from both bureaucratic and dramaturgical perspectives.

Göpfert's data are derived from roughly 18 months of ethnographic work done in various departments in the Nigerien gendarmerie between 2009 and 2014. He used observational techniques in 12 locations, all administrative or regular gendarmerie stations, and he had conversations with more than 80 gendarmes. In presenting the data, Göpfert discusses the gendarmerie brigade and gendarmes just outside the town of Godiya. However, the brigade does not actually exist; it was created for the purposes of the book. He engaged in a form of ethnographic fictionalization to protect the identities of the gendarmes who talked to him because of possible repercussions about the information that they shared. While the brigade location and gendarme names are fictional, the individuals presented are actual gendarmes from various locations that Göpfert studied.

Göpfert begins by providing some context to understand how gendarmes conduct their work, details that set the stage for understanding the discussion to come. He points out that a key ability required to be a successful gendarme is knowing when to work by the book and apply the law, and when to work off the book and to make an arrangement. Gendarmes face expectations



from three different groups: their superiors, the prosecutors, and the public. As well, they must navigate their experiences to resolve issues in a way satisfactory to all three groups. Göpfert notes that the gendarmerie exists on a frontier. In addition to the frontier being a space, it has certain stakes attached, which shape the expectations of those the gendarmerie deals with.

Göpfert next focuses on the history of the gendarmerie in Niger, reaching back to their colonial roots. He points out how while exact details are not clear, the gendarmerie have roots in French military colonization, which has shaped views on intrusion into perceived internal affairs, as well as the idea of a desirable social order. An increase in bureaucratization led to a focus on peacekeeping efforts, and Nigerien independence led to the incorporation of Nigerien peoples into the gendarmerie and a shift from French regulation. There were changes in operation, and Göpfert notes that the gendarmerie are police with military training and status, which gives them two distinct purposes: (1) they defend the borders of Niger from external threats and (2) work to keep the peace and maintain order internally.

Göpfert applies a bureaucratic perspective to the steps that gendarmes take in dealing with problems brought to them. Over the course of multiple chapters, he presents the work being done as that which shapes and presents a narrative of the issues that they respond to. Civilians are able to come to the gendarmes and present their concerns in an open format, to focus on what they feel are the important details, free from bureaucratic constraints. The gendarmes next work to bring the narrative together, using their own personal contacts and connections to gain a more complete understanding of the situation. They then fit the narrative into an aesthetically pleasing report, one which structures and organizes the narrative into a clear presentation of the issue. The gendarmes function as a bridge between the people and the bureaucracy, ensuring that there is effective communication between those two elements of society.

Göpfert finishes by applying a dramaturgical perspective to the work done by gendarmes, pointing out that the gendarmes' efforts focus on establishing and maintaining the peace, rather than just enforcing the law to the letter. He shows that gendarmes present themselves as mediators, rather than as enforcers. The goal is to make peace in any incident, to get everyone on the same page. They also engage in repair work, worrying less about who is right and who is wrong, and more about reconciliation, moving beyond the situation. To do so, gendarmes often engage in under-enforcement, not fully enforcing the law, and resolving issues through out-of-court settlements. In a sense, the gendarmes engage in a form of restorative justice, focused on repairing the harm done through mediation with victims and offenders. The problem with this is that it places gendarmes in a position of irresolvable tension; they are caught between the reality in which they find themselves, and the abstract ideals which they are meant to uphold. It is difficult to please all parties involved, as well as their own interests and motivations, and the result is a community among the gendarmes, while simultaneously experiencing isolation from all those that they deal with.

Again, Göpfert presents a unique perspective on policing in rural areas. Gendarmes, a largely rural police force, occupy a distinct position in their society. Stated earlier, they operate as the connection between the people and the bureaucracy, and stand with a foot in each world. They do so despite facing numerous challenges to engaging in their work. *Policing the Frontier: An Ethnography of Two Worlds in Niger* is an intriguing and informative read that presents a distinct way to understand various aspects of rural policing. This focus on bureaucratic and dramaturgical perspectives can be of use for students, researchers, and policymakers to better understand the experiences of those engaged in rural policing, not just in Niger, but also in other rural communities in the Global North and Global South.