

## REVIEW ESSAY

# Not the Heart of Darkness: Introducing a Borderland Perspective to the Study of Conflict

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**Benedikt Korf and Timothy Raeymaekers, eds. 2013. *Violence on the Margins: States, Conflict, and Borderlands*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan. 289 pp.**

**Andreas Däfinger. 2013. *The Economics of Ethnic Conflict: The Case of Burkina Faso*. Rochester, NY: James Currey. 212 pp.**

Benedict Anderson's famous description of nations as "imagined communities" proves itself the most salient at the margins of a state, where a supreme act of imagination is required to perceive the significance of map-made borders on a physical landscape that rarely conforms to the lines drawn by history and politics. But those imaginary lines have real-world consequences, from the wars that have erupted over arguments about which ruler's imagination should be instituted to the proliferation of smuggling that thrives in many border regions due to differential regimes of law and taxation among neighboring states. Another effect of those lines encasing imagined communities is to draw our focus upon the political and cultural centers as embodying the purer essence of the nation, thus reducing borderlands to a marginal role, dependent upon the center rather than independent and thus in need of the greater protection against cultural and political contamination.

Just as Richard Bulliet, in his 1995 book *Islam: The View from the Edge*, worked to dislodge Islamic history from the caliphate and other central authorities, focusing instead upon believers who lived far from their influence, so do the contributors to *Violence on the Margins* work to depict "contemporary violent conflict and state formation on the basis of people's own experiences at the border, and the way they affect the making and unmaking of political configurations" (p. 6). Divided into four parts, *Violence at the Margins* offers a series of case studies from Africa and Asia that introduce the borderland perspective and then examine issues of violence and security, sovereignty and state identity, and war and peace economies. In an early chapter, Markus Virgil Hoehne and Dereje Feyissa assert the salience of borders in a supposedly "borderless" and globalized world on the basis of "the continued relevance of mechanisms of inclusion into a privileged collective self and the exclusions of 'others,'" such as "certainly concerns the relationship between Africa and Europe" (p. 60). Regarding the Karen separatists of Burma, Sylvia Brown insists that the borderland perspective "challenges the idea

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<http://www.africa.ufl.edu/asq/v15/v15i1a8.pdf>

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ISSN: 2152-2448

that state-making necessarily involves the gradual diffusion of power outward, from the center to the periphery,” especially given the Karen National Union’s ability to provide needed services and develop relations with transnational actors (p. 90). But borderlands are not always frontiers, as Karen Büscher and Gillian Mathys observe in their chapter on Goma/Gisenyi, a conjoined twin of a city that joins the Democratic Republic of Congo and Rwanda as much as it separates them; there, the existence in close proximity of two separate regulatory regimes “has created possibilities and opportunities bridging the two cities in a joined dependence on transborder exchange... characterized by a constant negotiation and navigation between these spheres” (p. 120).

As much as state identity might be crafted from the center outward, so, too, do states use the borders in order to build identities, as Christine Bichel demonstrates in her chapter on the Ferghana Valley, which is transected by Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan, all of whom encourage the cultivation, by their own populations, of disputed territory in this region so as to solidify their own particular claims on the land. A similar dynamic comes to light in Bert Suykens’s chapter on the Assam-Nagaland border dispute in northeastern India, where marginal populations can “become of central importance to the state and state agents as they symbolize the inclusion of certain disputed territory within a particular nation” (p. 168). Most noteworthy in the final section on war and peace economies is Wolfgang Zeller’s survey examination of what he calls a “borderland governance” in the Uganda–South Sudan borderland, in which a fundamental ambiguity about the future, due to protracted conflict, creates its own set of conditions that compromise agents of the central state, who end up “using methods straddling and transgressing the boundaries of legality and territory to pursue their political and private business interests” in both times of peace and war (p. 213).

In many respects, for example social borders between ethnic or class, groups can produce much the same dynamic as political borders between nations, facilitating conflict as these groups compete for similar resources, but also creating the possibility of friendly relations as individuals use these social borders in order to engage in profitable activities. This dynamic lies at the heart of Andreas Dafinger’s *The Economics of Ethnic Conflict*, which offers a rich anthropological account of relations between the Fulbe and Bisa in Burkina Faso. Dafinger opens by placing Burkina Faso and the province of Boulgou, the site of most of his ethnographic work, within the context of global systems. He observes how the state, with the support of global donor organizations, has a vested interest in instituting the idea of private property (for the security of global investment), as well as “integrating local agropastoral production into the formal economic sector,” given that traditional subsistence production “is hard to assess, difficult to control and almost impossible to tax” (p. 48). Within this framework, the pastoral Fulbe peoples are at a disadvantage, given that their transhumance patterns defy easy integration into a “modern” political economy.

Dafinger spends an important chapter outlining the ethnic division of labor and how that depends upon local land rights. The receipt of land “establishes well defined obligations through the relationship with the land” and “is the symbolic expression of the incorporation in the local community” (p. 59). Fulbe herders may borrow land with the permission of Bisa farmers, for whom Fulbe numbers can prove an asset in the allocation of resources from state or global institutions. However, the Fulbe largely exist outside this framework of land ownership

and are never incorporated fully into the dominant society. Rather than separating Fulbe and Bisa completely, the ethnic division of labor creates a locus of friendly interaction, given that Bisa often invest in cattle and make arrangements for their care with Fulbe herders. This allows Bisa owners “to keep them away from their own compound and hidden from their own community” and thus avoid certain obligations to share their wealth (p. 93). Conflict, in many cases, serves largely to maintain the illusion of a hard, impermeable ethnic divide and thus obscure the actors who profit by moving goods across that divide; likewise, Fulbe herders attached to a particular settled community “have a vested interest in keeping up ethnic tensions in order to ward off non-local herders” (p. 157).

The pairing of these two volumes can serve to shatter some embedded misconceptions regarding the nature of both the state and of conflict. In his conclusion to *Violence on the Margins*, Jonathan Goodhand critiques the standard tropes employed by policy makers, who tend to define the frontier regions of certain states as inherently ungoverned or ungovernable, insisting that a historical perspective of state formation reveals that “the brutal politics of sovereignty playing themselves out in many of today’s borderlands are not anomalies or aberrations, diversions from the liberal, Lockean norm. To an extent, they *are* the norm historically speaking, and ‘unruly’ borderlands are not automatic signifiers of state breakdown” (p. 259) but rather a reflection of the centrality of violence in the emergence of stable political orders and borders. In addition, many such policy makers readily equate conflict—especially ethnic conflict—with violence, or at least ascribe to such conflict an enormous potential for such violence, particularly given the mass atrocities that have been witnessed in recent decades. However, as Michel Wieviorka observed in his 2012 book *Evil*, violence is not identical with conflict but rather its opposite, something which flares up in the absence of channels for institutional negotiation. This assertion is particularly salient in the light of Dafinger’s study of ethnic conflict in Burkina Faso, for conflict between the Fulbe and Bisa peoples is both a mechanism of negotiating for advantages as well as a screen behind which relatively friendly relations might be concealed for the sake of mutual profit. As he notes in his conclusion, “the exploitation of ethnicity through over- or under-communicating ethnic differences, and the concealment of economic activities and cross-cutting ties... are strategies of dealing with economic and demographic change” and not automatically indicative of potential violence (p. 184). Indeed, though the Fulbe people go nigh unrepresented in the government of Burkina Faso, making it seem the model of an ethnicized bureaucracy, the fact is, as Dafinger reveals, the administration has ended up establishing itself “as a distinct social group that now competes with local groups over the same or similar resources” (p. 182).

Introducing a borderland perspective (with both political and social borders) serves to undermine certain myths that states and the “developed world” hold about themselves—the myth that violence is alien to the process of state formation, the myth that ethnic conflict is inherently violent, and the myth that only a “civilized” center can hold the “wild” frontier in check and provide the resources that people need to fulfill their own potential. Much of Western political discourse is built upon these myths, and we will be well served if these books can help to lessen their influence in years to come.