



A Book Review of Adler, Gary: *Empathy Beyond US Borders—The Challenges of Transnational Civic Engagement*

Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, UK, 2019

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“If head and heart knowledge were joined, would we build an expensive wall in the desert that people scale? Would we allow hundreds of deaths in the desert each year?” (p. 99). In the monograph *Empathy Beyond US Borders: The Challenges of Transnational Civic Engagement* from Cambridge University Press, sociologist Gary Adler, Assistant Professor of Sociology at Penn State University, discusses the moral dimensions of immersion travel, the organizational challenges in transnational engagement, and individual empathetic transformation without knowing how to help.

The focus of the book is immersion trips, visits in which organizations seek to engage travelers with international civic issues in the host countries. These trips are carried out by international non-governmental organizations such as BorderLinks, a nonpartisan faith-based group that has taken thousands of Americans into Mexican border towns and deserts to witness poverty and immigration conditions over four decades. Adler examines the process in which *feeder organizations* (churches and universities) contract *immersion travel producers* like BorderLinks to produce global engagement and empathy within individuals and broader civil society. Adler is in a unique position to describe the chain of interaction linking religious organizations to civic participation, as he has written two previous books on religious organizations: *American Parishes: Remaking Local Catholicism* (Fordham University Press, 2019) and *Secularism, Catholicism, and the Future of Public Life* (Oxford University Press, 2015).

In his latest book, Adler highlights the religious underpinnings of immersion travel producers, as well as their contemporary secularized forms. As an example, BorderLinks was founded within the liberation theology movement, but it has distanced itself from initial religious justifications and has focused on being a neutral imparter of immigration policy education. According to Adler, BorderLinks often

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fails in its neutrality. Although attempting to bring in points of view from sources such as Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) and Border Patrol, Adler ultimately concludes that BorderLinks has difficulty navigating its neutral stance. This is witnessed in a variety of ways—from education and opinion formation, to engagement through “real” stories, Mexican family host stays, and desert walks.

Adler does this through 8 chapters, organized into three sections: 1. Organizational Roots and Dilemmas, 2. Activities, Emotions, and Empathy, and 3. Patterns of Experience and Transformation. Using data gathered from fieldwork rich with firsthand accounts, and in a wonderful narrative voice, Adler describes the individual-level as well as organizational-level impact of BorderLinks. Using quantitative measures and qualitative accounts from participants, he assesses the impact of various BorderLinks activities on the individual traveler.

Overall, Adler’s method and narrative paint a comprehensive picture of the world of immersion travel. He takes on loaded topics ranging from cosmopolitan civil experience, the neo-colonial “spectacle of suffering”, globalism and empathy, political engagement, and wealth inequality across borders, Adler aptly navigates, challenges, and explains many mechanisms of globalization through the lens of BorderLinks. This analysis sometimes loses the historical framework of the religious organizations that he set up in the opening chapters of the book. This framework fails to be consistently applied in the case of present-day BorderLinks. As the secularized form of immersion travel has become present within the modern case, religious underpinnings have grown less important as a justification- which is shown by Adler’s analysis.

Students of the sociology of organizations, education, empathy, and immigration would benefit from engaging with this work, as would international relations scholars who work on international non-governmental organizations, immigration, and migration. Additionally, because this book is written in engaging and accessible prose, it would be helpful to immigration policy makers and informed lay readers alike.

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