



Book Review

Migration and Agriculture: Mobility and Change in the Mediterranean Area.

Alessandra Corrado, Carlos de Castro and Domenico Perrotta, eds. 2016.

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Reviewed by Susan E. Mannon

University of the Pacific

smannon@pacific.edu

The importance of this book is writ large in the headlines of the day. “UN agencies urge Italy to let migrants get off rescue boat.” “EU leaders address migration at summit following UNHCR refugee report.” “Almost 600 migrants died crossing Med in 2019.” And these are just the headlines from a single day—June 21, 2019. It is clear that as a socio-political issue, international migration looms large in the Mediterranean, as it does in almost every corner of the globe. What is less clear, or at least what gets lost in the headlines, is that agriculture plays a crucial role. *Migration and Agriculture: Mobility and Change in the Mediterranean Area* fills this gap. By focusing on case studies of agricultural restructuring and labor mobility in the Mediterranean, the book brings analyses of the global food system into public debates around migration, and discussions about labor migration to the study of food regimes. There is arguably no region better suited for this task than the Mediterranean, which, along with the southern border of the United States, has been ground zero for the global migration crisis.

Part of the Routledge series on rural livelihoods, *Migration and Agriculture* is edited by three European scholars who have written extensively about migrant farm workers in Europe. Contributors to the volume come from a range of countries and disciplines, many of whom attended a 2013 conference at the University of Bergamo in Italy. The book covers cases from both Mediterranean Europe and the Maghreb. Most chapters are ethnographic in nature, drawing



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on months if not years of careful observation in the field. One of the challenges of writing the book, according to the editors, was that none of the contributors were native English speakers. However, this was not at all obvious, as the chapters read smoothly in English and across disciplinary lines.

With 17 case studies in all, and certain cases overrepresented, the volume would have benefitted from more careful curation. Both Spain and Italy, for example, are the focus of five chapters each, an outcome no doubt linked to the fact that two of the editors (Corrado and Perrotta) are Italian and one (de Castro) is Spanish. That said, both Italy and Spain have become agro-export powerhouses in Europe and may deserve such disproportionate attention. There are only a few cases outside of Europe, most prominent among them Morocco. It would have been helpful to know how representative these countries are of labor-intensive agriculture in the Mediterranean.

The introduction to this volume lays out a key part of the book's story, which is the expansion of export-oriented agriculture in the Mediterranean over the past few decades. For readers coming from a world-systems perspective, the introduction does not disappoint. It locates the region in the semi-periphery, noting the late modernization of its agricultural sector and the persistence of small, family farms well into the 20th century. Even as southern Europe was incorporated into the European Union (EU) and export-oriented agriculture took hold of the region, the retailers controlling the agri-food trade remained headquartered further north, primarily in the UK, France, and Germany. Thus, in spite of key differences between the European and non-European Mediterranean, the region as a whole is bound by a peripheral location in the global food system. It is also bound, of course, by labor migration circuits connecting global South to global North.

Although the introduction makes a convincing case for viewing the Mediterranean as a region, the book might have drawn out differences within the region as well. To some extent, it tries to do this. The volume is organized into five parts, with the first three parts describing three different patterns of agri-food restructuring in the region. These patterns map roughly onto different geographic areas. The first part examines the production and processing of high-value foods, like cheese and wine in the north of the Mediterranean (France and northern Italy). In these cases, processors are afforded more power than producers elsewhere in the region because of their 'quality' products. To the south are the fresh produce enclaves of Spain, Italy and Greece, which are the subject of the second part of the book. These cases are marked by higher levels of vulnerability for both farmers, whose profit margins are squeezed by ever powerful retailers, and migrant workers, whose low wages are often what keep farmers afloat.

The third part of the book moves outside of Europe to consider the MENA countries of Morocco and Turkey. It is not clear, however, how these two cases constitute a third pattern of agri-food restructuring. The Moroccan case examines the production and export of tomatoes, whereas the Turkish case considers Syrian refugees working in that country's agricultural sector. It could be that the conditions under which farmers in these countries engage in export agriculture are distinctly different. For example, they do not enjoy a protected market or subsidies, as farmers do in the EU under its Common Agricultural Policy. Morocco has enjoyed some access to EU markets under special trade agreements meant to stabilize the country economically and politically.

But such access is limited by quotas and disproportionately benefits foreign investors. Another key difference between the EU and MENA cases is that the latter underwent agricultural restructuring as a result of structural adjustment policies imposed from international financial institutions, which, again, tended to favor foreign capital. How these intra-regional differences shape farmers' and workers' experiences might have been an interesting question to ask of the empirical cases.

In addition to detailing the intensification of export agriculture in the Mediterranean, the case studies document the challenges facing small farmers. Across Europe, agriculture has been transformed by the rise of a few, powerful supermarket chains, which has shifted power from growers to retailers. These chains now dictate food prices, quality standards, and production schedules, a situation that has favored large farmers, since they alone have the resources to accommodate these demands. The numbers tell this story well. The average farm size in Spain, for example, grew from 15.4 to 24 hectares between 1990 and 2010. Over this same period, the number of farm holdings in that country fell from 1,594,000 to 990,000 (5).

For those small farmers who have managed to stay afloat, dwindling profit margins and the growing demands of retailers have left them little choice but to lower wages and maintain tighter control over workers. Under these conditions, it is no surprise that native-born workers have not been keen on taking jobs in the field and packing house, perpetuating a decades-long march of native-born workers from country to city. As a result, farmers have been looking further and further afield for workers – moving first from family to village, then from village to other parts of the country, and finally from within the country to overseas. The first wave of foreign migrants began arriving in the 1970s, becoming a visible fixture in rural areas by the 1990s. For example, by 2015, foreign workers represented 24 percent of agricultural wage laborers in Spain and 90 percent in Greece (10).

Although many small farmers have imposed grueling labor conditions and wages on migrant workers, this volume also underscores the precarity of smallholders. In many ways, these farmers are more proletariat than capitalist. In her study of Huelva, Spain, for example, Alicia Reigada finds that smallholders who intensified strawberry production did so not to accumulate capital, but to preserve their family farm and social identity. Yet, herein lies the paradox. To survive, these same farmers must undervalue the work done by migrant laborers. The editors might have emphasized the uniquely contradictory position of farmers by juxtaposing chapters on smallholders who lost the family farm to chapters on smallholders who struggled but survived, to chapters on large farmers who expanded and thrived under conditions of competitive capitalism. But the book is to be commended for understanding that farm owners often lose out in the transition to export agriculture just as much as farm workers do. (A standout in this regard is Alia Gana's chapter, which emphasizes the central role played by aggrieved small farmers in instigating the Arab Spring.) The only advantage smallholders have is that they can usually transfer the pressure of their subordinate status on to workers.

The most interesting parts of this book involve analyses of how the recruitment and management of foreign workers has evolved over time. This subject, and the question of how some

workers are contesting labor conditions, are the subjects of the last two parts of the volume. Initially, the recruitment of agricultural workers from abroad was largely informal. This changed by the 2000s when national governments and temporary work agencies got more involved. Formal recruitment took different forms across the region, but often involved temporary migration schemes managed by the state, such as Spain's *contratos en origen* system. Private agencies have also arisen to supply workers, as have informal labor brokers who utilize village and ethnic networks. The workers targeted by these recruitment schemes are as varied as the modes of recruitment, ranging from Moroccan women with children who migrate temporarily to work in Spain's strawberry industry to Punjabi immigrants who come to work in the dairy farms supplying Italy's cheese industry.

Farmers use ethnicity, nationality, legal status and gender when assigning workers to particular industries or jobs. Indeed, a diverse and segmented workforce appears to be a defining feature of the region's agro-export sector. In their analysis of Greece's strawberry industry, for example, Apostolos Papadopoulos and Loukia-Maria Fratsea document how farmers rely on workers from Albania, Egypt, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Bulgaria, and Romania, channeling different nationalities into different parts of the production process. Employers throughout the region rely on stereotypes to justify this segmentation – be it a Hindu reverence for cows, which justifies their filling a niche in Italy's dairy industry, or a supposed North African penchant for absenteeism, which explains their concentration in some of the most precarious positions in France's wine industry. But these ethnic preferences and niches are more often the result of recruitment strategies and the constant changes in labor supply as workers move in and out of countries and industries in search of better wages and working conditions. Once Poland, Romania and Bulgaria were admitted into the EU, for example, workers from these countries were permitted full labor mobility throughout the EU. Most moved to better jobs further north, just as those 'chronically absent' North Africans did after gaining legal status.

Women of all nationalities are channeled into the lowest paid positions, though in some cases they are constructed as ideal workers. Spain's *contratos en origen* system, for example, targets mothers from Morocco and Eastern Europe for employment in the country's fresh fruit sector. The architects of this program imagined that children would anchor the women in their country of origin, such that they would not overstay their work visa. This and other novel migration schemes help manage labor mobility according to the interests of employers and the state, as well as contain labor unrest. Divided along the lines of gender, ethnicity, nationality, and legal status, workers are too busy competing with one another for jobs to recognize their common class interests. The book might have said more about how migrant workers are received by the rural communities where they find employment, since the community is a space in which divisions among workers may be challenged or exacerbated. The volume opens by cataloguing violent clashes between migrant and native-born workers. But the rest of the book focuses on production relations, largely neglecting question of community relations.

Overall, this volume gives readers a sense of the vulnerability and exploitation that have come to define Mediterranean agriculture – from peripheral countries that have turned to export

agriculture to meet the interests of foreign capital, to small farmers who have struggled to maintain a way of life under the thumb of large supermarket chains, to migrant workers who have left behind countries and families in search of job and opportunity. As Alessandra Corrado notes in the final chapter, these layers of dependency and inequality are defining features of a neoliberal food regime that emerged in the 1970s. Corrado's historic overview of food regimes in the Mediterranean and her argument for analyzing the Mediterranean as a region defined by intense labor and capital mobility might have served as a better introduction than conclusion. Had this been the case, a more illuminating structure for this book might have emerged – one that showcased how neoliberalism intensifies the inferior positioning of the global South, the smallholder, and the landless laborer. But this is a quibble. *Migration and Agriculture* fulfills its intellectual aim, which is to demonstrate how agriculture plays a pivotal role in the human drama unfolding around the Mediterranean Sea.