



Book Review

Seasonal workers in Mediterranean agriculture: The social costs of eating fresh

Edited by Jörg Gertel and Sarah Ruth Sippel
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One of the most common justifications for maintaining low-paid, precarious conditions for farm workers is that while farmers are being squeezed by globalized competition, economic turmoil and increasingly unpredictable weather patterns, labour remains one of the few costs they can control. This lends a Thatcherian logic of “no alternative” to the expanding complexes of seasonal labour migration, which mobilize workers from economically marginalized regions of the world to orchards, fields, and greenhouses in wealthier nations. *Seasonal Workers in Mediterranean Agriculture* compellingly portrays how migrants bear the harshest costs of procuring year-round fresh fruits and vegetables for a privileged few. While giving voice to the social inequality that fuels the dominant agri-food system, the authors aim to show how the stretching of growing seasons and national borders has made room for new forms of insecurity and profitability.

The meticulously documented historical, ethnographic, and quantitative case studies of this twenty-chapter edited volume are organized into three regional sections, encompassing France, Spain, and Morocco. In turn, these countries are linked to migrant-sending regions elsewhere in North Africa as well as Latin America and Eastern Europe. Comparative and conceptual chapters woven throughout provide coherency to a text that, at times, narrowly avoids being weighed down by its breadth of empirical content. An editorial pruning or merging a few slightly repetitive contextual chapters might have rendered the book more affordable for those on a student budget. Nonetheless, a streamlined writing style and structure from cover to cover

makes for fluid prose. This is all the more remarkable considering the text was translated across multiple disciplines and languages.

Written mainly for academic audiences, *Seasonal Workers* offers an innovative contribution to food studies literature by integrating analyses of global agri-food systems with geographies of labour migration. Scholars concerned with gendered and racialized labour markets, precarious migration, environmental justice, and the economic geography of food retail and trade will all find valuable insights in the text. Canadian readers will likely note striking parallels between descriptions of circular labour migration schemes in the Mediterranean and agricultural streams of Canada's Temporary Foreign Worker Program.

Throughout the book, the overarching themes of “flexicurity” and “flexiprofit” provide helpful conceptual bridges between broad-level discussions of political economy on the one hand, and workers' embodied accounts of navigating intense exploitation on the other. The volatile conditions associated with flexicurity create a workforce prepared to adapt to high levels of risk, often mobilizing all of their personal resources to achieve a temporary modicum of security. Flexiprofit for employers arises within the same neoliberal context of ruptured social bonds and uncertainty; it involves an attempt to secure short-term profits by offloading costs to others. One of the key arguments the book advances is that amidst “sea of plastic” greenhouses that symbolize the Mediterranean's agricultural intensification and global integration, the stability of farmers' livelihoods has become increasingly dependent on the low negotiating power of seasonal workers.

Notwithstanding their social justice analysis, the authors avoid facilely victimizing workers or vilifying employers. Instead, they detail how complex social relations and class differentiations in seasonal farm labour have unfolded through histories of economic hardships, including the legacy of colonialism in Morocco and the loss of traditional livelihoods in both migrant sending and receiving countries. This approach is particularly evocative in several chapters that explore how social constructions of gender have become institutionalized in farm labour migration. As Sippel and Nieto illustrate in Chapters 15 and 16, the almost exclusively feminized workforce in Moroccan export-oriented strawberry production draws heavily on cultural and gender stereotypes. Moroccan women are constructed as “ideal workers” based on their supposed patience and ability to handle crops more delicately. However, these qualities are portrayed as natural, taken-for-granted traits rather than indispensable skills that warrant commensurate remuneration. As argued throughout the book, discourses depicting seasonal workers as unskilled and individually replaceable ensure a supply of low-cost, flexible workers. In examining how such a compliant, relatively captive migrant workforce is achieved in Spanish strawberry monocultures, Hellio (Chapter 12) unpacks country-of-origin labour contracts that require Moroccan employees to be married women with young children, with an application co-signed by their husband. In effect, the gender regime established by Spanish employers and Moroccan recruiters is seen as “one of the most effective control mechanisms of the worker's mobility” (p. 149). Noting that some Moroccan women now time their pregnancies around

circular migration contracts, Helliö follows the trajectory of agricultural restructuring across shifting borders and pervading intimate spheres of family life.

When addressing the relationship between capital and state, the text provides a shrewd evaluation of how the state-market nexus occasionally nods to migrants' rights while negotiating profit accumulation and xenophobic discourses. In Chapter 19, Lewis considers New Zealand's Recognized Seasonal Employer scheme as an example of a small, tightly regulated labour migration program that can generate mutual benefits and rights for workers, albeit while entrenching new forms of socio-spatial inequality. The tone of Lewis's approach to seasonal labour regulation in New Zealand contrasts with that of Lindner and Kathmann (Chapter 10). They stress how state-supported seasonal worker programs in Spain and the EU at large bind workers to a single employer and prevent migrants' social integration. From their perspective, "the formalization of labour mobility within Europe is associated with a legalization that does not correspond to increased rights" (p. 121).

By closely tracing the strategies migrants and their families draw upon in pursuing migration projects, the authors underscore the mutability between formal migration and "tolerated" undocumented migration in Mediterranean agri-food regimes. These regimes provide some scope for migrants to seek a better life. As the book demonstrates, however, they simultaneously ensure seasonal workers—along with affected ecosystems—shoulder the brunt of harms arising from fresh food production. These include physical exposure to agro-chemicals and difficult working conditions, social and familial isolation, and the emotional costs of accepting an uncertain, subordinate status.

While the book sets out to explore the drivers of perishable food production and the social costs of "eating fresh," one of its main shortfalls is a lack of attention paid to the consumption side of the equation. If we accept the widely touted proposition that shifting toward diets of unprocessed, plant-based foods can help to resolve global crises of human health and climate change, where do farm workers fit in this win-win algebra? In addition, I would like to have seen further nuance around descriptions of "industrial" agriculture as the fundamental site of rising inequality for seasonal workers. As discussed in the cases of Bouches-du-Rhône, France and Almería, Spain, relatively small, family-managed farms play a role in the demand for flexible labour. That these farms may draw on either traditional production methods or highly intensive technologies challenges the standard normative framing of "good" family farms and "bad" industrial agriculture, suggesting a more complicated hybrid.

On the whole, however, *Seasonal Workers in Mediterranean Agriculture* presents an extremely well researched and troubling tale about the human and ecological costs of contemporary fresh fruit and vegetable provisioning. It contributes to critically under-explored conversations about how sweeping economic and social changes in our food system have often hinged on developing new ways to commodify the most marginalized members of society.

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Her research explores the relationships between sustainable food movements, migration, and farm workers in Canada. More broadly, her community-based scholarly and advocacy work focuses on food sovereignty and health equity.