

The Chicken Trail: Following Workers, Migrants, and Corporations across the Americas. By Kathleen C. Schwartzman. Ithaca, N.Y.: ILR Press, 2013. Pp. xii+202. \$24.95 (paper).

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The Spanish word for chicken is *pollo*, referring to both the bird and to a migrant who crosses the border in search of a job in the United States. *The Chicken Trail: Following Workers, Migrants, and Corporations across the Americas* examines the history of poultry production in the United States and Mexico, describing how this industry has been affected by neoliberalism and NAFTA. Kathleen C. Schwartzman also wades into the U.S. immigration debate, which she characterizes in a Manichean fashion: one is either a nativist or racist (as dubbed by opponents of this group) or a “bleeding heart liberal.” Responding to this polarization, she offers a moralistic solution.

The author starts by unraveling a dilemma that is both American and global in scope. Globally, neoliberalism and free trade have undermined the basis of livelihood for millions of people in developing countries, which often compels them to emigrate. Meanwhile, economic transformation in the United States leaves it with manually skilled jobs that seemingly “nobody wants,” desirable jobs that are outsourced overseas, and jobs for which Americans are not qualified. This book focuses on the intertwined predicament of a “push” of emigration from developing nations and the “pull” of U.S. jobs. Tracing a single commodity chain, Schwartzman applies a nuanced qualitative and quantitative analysis to contest the validity of the “commonsense” neoliberal economic model that generated such a dilemma.

Schwartzman’s central argument is about how the U.S. poultry industry confronted a dual crisis since the 1980s: overproduction and declining profits that followed the introduction of Taylorist production techniques along with heightened worker militancy. In response to this crisis, industry managers opted to displace African-American women workers with Hispanics. Managers actively recruited Mexican workers, even if they were undocumented. Schwartzman focuses on five southeastern states and presents three strong pieces of evidence: there was a sharp rise of Hispanic population in these five states, where they were largely absent prior to 1980; many workers were undocumented; by 2000, Hispanics had substituted for African-Americans.

After a unionization drive in the U.S. South, employers brought in Mexican undocumented workers with false documents. To prevent them from

accessing union rights, migrants were generally “fired” after 90 days and rehired the same day under different names. The issue was not that African-American workers no longer wanted the dirty, dangerous, difficult, and underpaid jobs in poultry production. The author shows that although they continued to apply for these jobs, their access to new industry jobs was limited. They consequently experienced higher levels of unemployment and poverty. Ironically, poultry industry managers used labor strikes as an excuse to get rid of an increasingly combative labor force.

Having long favored the poultry industry through policies such as feed-grain subsidies, the American state stepped in to address the issue of overproduction. For instance, the U.S. government subsidized exports to promote foreign markets, responding to the increasing lobby power of this concentrated industry. On the side of labor, organizing proved to be difficult “because the national office often supported local CIO officers whose position was antiblack and anti-Communist” (p. 71). While a vigorous union movement eventually emerged, the capitalist response was fierce, triggering antiunion legislation in the 1980s.

Within this industry-friendly political milieu, poultry companies systematically engaged in illegal behavior, including underpaying migrant workers as well as underreport injuries and accidents. Lawsuits against Tyson Foods, for instance, either led to acquittal or light consequences. The active hiring of undocumented migrants led to declining unionism. By the 1990s, unions (e.g., UFCW) shifted from an antimigrant position toward trying to organize them—at least the legal guest workers. But employers still prefer vulnerable migrants to either whites or blacks, both of whom can more readily organize. Ethnic succession, then, was in fact intentional ethnic displacement.

Turning to Mexico’s restructuring to accommodate global integration, Schwartzman adopts a dependency-theory perspective. According to her, it was not just free trade and other “domestic policies” launched by the Mexican government, but also “exogenous” pressures from the United States, the IMF, and the World Bank that resulted in Mexico’s changed state–civil society relation. The newly restructured U.S. poultry industry needed to offload its massive production output, and Mexico became one of the industry’s key developing-country export markets. Mexico also experienced a substantial transformation of its own industry, displacing the small *traspatio* (barnyard) peasant producers in favor of very large corporations, both Mexican and transnational.

Consequently, Mexico became a net food importer. Domestic producers lobbied for permits to import feed and eliminate chicken price controls in the 1980s, but the government wanted to alleviate price inflation on basic foods. Rather than acknowledging the domestic political dynamic, the

author attributes price controls to an “outgrowth” of Mexico’s dependent location in the global order.

Schwartzman thus misses the chance to discuss how neoliberal policies were chosen by Mexico’s ruling class to lower the cost of labor power. Cheap wages would give Mexico a comparative advantage for manufacturing. Massive out-migration and the loss of food self-sufficiency, however, were the unintended consequences (Gerardo Otero, “Neoliberal Globalization, NAFTA, and Migration: Mexico’s Loss of Food and Labor Sovereignty,” *Journal of Poverty* 15 [2011]: 384–402.). Schwartzman’s dependency account also misses the strong political pressure exerted in Mexico by large business groups starting in the 1970s to reduce the state’s role in the economy and for freer international trade and investment.

The book’s conclusion revisits the U.S. migration debate, offering a moral and voluntaristic solution: involvement and compromise by stakeholders to their mutual benefit. But what about the major structural differences in political clout between ruling forces and other stakeholders? Why would the powerful compromise if they can impose their will? Unless, that is, a political coalition can be built from the bottom up. Ensuring that all workers in the United States have the same rights requires concerted efforts by social-democratic forces like unions. A starting point is to give all migrant workers a route to citizenship. For Mexico, the critical position on migration proposes to account for domestic political dynamics if we are to promote viable economic opportunities to retain its people.

Migration-Trust Networks: Social Cohesion in Mexican U.S.-bound Emigration. By Nadia Y. Flores-Yeffal. College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2013. Pp. xxiv+200. \$40.00.

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Migration-Trust Networks is the outcome of 13 years of research on Mexican migrant networks from the state of Guanajuato, complemented with short periods of ethnographic fieldwork in El Salvador. Nadia Y. Flores-Yeffal’s main finding is the existence of a social phenomenon she calls the “migration-trust network” (MTN). What makes this network so special as to deserve a name of its own? Two properties stand out. One is the lack of direct reciprocity, which is recognized as “solidarity.” Simply put, Flores-Yeffal is describing the mechanical solidarity of rural communities transplanted into migrants’ destinations in the United States. The other is that this solidarity network doesn’t run out. On the contrary, it keeps expanding and incorporating urban-origin migrants, because sharing the fundamental risk of being undocumented immigrants brings them all together.