

*Fishers at Work, Workers at Sea: A Puerto Rican Journal Through Labor and Refuge*, by David Griffith and Manuel Valdés Pizzini. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2002, 265 pp. \$62.50 (cloth), \$19.95 (paper).

DOI: 10.1177/0730888402239331

If you vacation in Puerto Rico or other parts of the Caribbean, you may wonder about the men who go out in small boats to catch fish from the beaches. If you are a social scientist, you will ask more: What kinds of workers are they? Are they fishers who also happen to work at other jobs for some or much of their lives, or are they wage laborers who turn to the sea? Are they peasant or petty commodity producers, or are they part of a proletariat? Why should we care? Griffith and Valdés Pizzini address these and other questions in their short, well-written study.

In the early chapters, the authors provide theoretical background, and they locate historical events and processes of Puerto Rico within the lives and households of fishers, including the creation of a rural proletariat to work in the sugarcane industry and the movement of this proletariat into mainland U.S. farm and urban labor. In the course of these and other events, the fisheries of Puerto Rico "turned into a labor buffer zone" (p. 52), a way to keep going during the downtimes and the off-seasons of plantation work and wage-labor. But it is also important to recognize the tremendous diversity in time and space and in the lives of individuals. As well, major structural changes, including not just the demise of sugarcane planting but also the rise of sportfishing and coastal gentrification, are important.

In Chapter 4, the authors focus on the core issue of semiproletarianization. They found that Puerto Rico's marine fishers typically move in and out of the wage-labor sector and a subsistence mode of production. Contrary to older Marxist and modernization theory, they argue that proletarianization is "rarely a linear, unitary process in which class formation proceeds smoothly" (p. 96). The lives of Puerto Rico's fishers are less evidence of a transition to full proletarianization than of an enduring, recurrent, and stubborn condition: "a perennial duality and logic that at times is difficult to comprehend" (p. 30). Making this duality more comprehensible and tracing the bumpy and complex process of "semiproletarianization" through people's lives are major goals of the book.

Most original is their argument in the fifth chapter about fishing as therapy. Again, lengthy narratives of life histories are used to make the point that for many Puerto Ricans, fishing functions as a sharp contrast to demeaning and uncertain wage-labor jobs, as a way to heal or soften the pain of the alienation created by migratory wage labor and of the physical disabilities created by accidents and hard work. Therapy is seen as a concept of Western capitalism that has been appropriated by fishers and invested with new meanings or applications in their attempts to make sense of their uneven incorporation into North American capitalism.

In subsequent chapters, Valdés Pizzini and Griffith provide stories of fishing as deproletarianization and explore the role of the household in this process of disengagement from wage labor. They also show the social problems created by economic restructuring and social change in coastal communities. They describe two conflicts: one between a sportfishing club and local fishers and the second between local fishers

and a network of professionals, officials, and others concerning the establishment of an official marine sanctuary or protected area. Both cases highlight the phenomenon of coastal gentrification. They also show how politically astute and engaged the fishers of Puerto Rico are and how they can manipulate, subvert, but also, in the process, legitimate established modes of discourse and confrontation.

The final chapter uses recent conflicts about the coastal waters of the island of Vieques and the U.S. Navy's use of them for bombing practice to frame concluding thoughts. One concerns the growing criminalization of fishing. Another, returning to the guiding theme of semiproletarianization, concerns the job insecurities created by global capitalism in its perennial quest for cheaper labor. Although Puerto Ricans are U.S. citizens, Puerto Rico is not a state; consequently, it is fair to portray this as a study of transnationalism as well. Hence, trips to the mainland are more than just trips; they are journeys fraught with cultural and economic meaning, as are movements between wage-labor and fishing.

*Fishers at Work, Workers at Sea* is very successful at conveying these and other messages. However, it is not perfect. One becomes a bit impatient when life histories are repeated. In addition, the exact timing of statements, observations, and experiences is treated vaguely, as a 20-year "ethnographic present." Thus, in a section on the fishing port of Puerto Real, the fisheries are described in the present tense when the references indicate that the research was first reported in 1996—and even in 1985 (p. 89). This practice is inconsistent with the authors' insistence on appreciation of the dynamics and specificities of people's lives and experiences. Some last minute updating would have helped as well. Puerto Rico's tuna-processing industry closed operations about 2 years before the book was published but is (briefly) discussed as if it still exists.

Happily, although the theory stays very much the same, gradually the cumbersome language of Marxism is largely abandoned. What began as a study of semiproletarianization is helpfully summed up instead as "an ethnography of highly mobile individuals who are situated in a matrix of labor contexts in the world economy throughout their lifetime. At the same time, they firmly hold to the identity of fishers and coastal settlers as their most meaningful . . . trait." (p. 237). The book is also graced in many places with poetic writing.

Finally, with respect to the initial question—are we talking about fishers at work or workers at sea—Griffith and Valdés Pizzini eventually say that this either/or question is wrong. It masks "the complex lives of these apparent rogues, in hiding, engaging, contesting, denying, fighting, and at some point surrendering to wage labor." (p. 235). The authors decided that they were not interviewing fishers but rather "people who at different times in their lives found refuge in the interstices of the coastal environs and in fishing as a vocation. [Nonetheless . . .] fishing is where they originally belong in the social structure, in the *longue durée* of maritime communities. But it is also where they draw upon, manipulate, and defy state and capital. It is the place where their lives are meaningful and the platform from which they embark on a wide and long journey into wage labor" (p. 236). Well said.

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