H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Cindy Hahamovitch. *No Man's Land: Jamaican Guestworkers in America and the Global History of Deportable Labor.* Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013. Illustrations. 352 pp. ISBN 978-1-4008-4002-1; $24.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-691-16015-3; $35.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-691-10268-9.

Reviewed by James Braun (Department of Sociology, University of Toronto)
Published on H-Caribbean (June, 2013)
Commissioned by Audra Abbe Diptee

No Man's Land examines the history of Jamaican farmworkers under the H-2 visa program in the United States, from the program's origins in World War II to the widespread mechanization of Florida sugar plantations in the 1990s. Responding to current American debates about immigration reform, Cindy Hahamovitch describes guest workers as a product of modern immigration regimes that have "always existed in symbiosis" with illegal immigrants, despite claims that guest worker programs are an alternative to undocumented migration (p. 237). She argues that such programs originate in the tension between capital's search for "cheap, pliable and ostensibly voluntary" labor and the state's increasing scrutiny over the boundaries of "legitimate" membership in the national community (p. 14). To this end, the book explores two central themes: the political construction (and contestation) of a labor shortage in American agriculture to convince the state to allow the importation of foreign workers, and the racialization of Jamaicans that legitimated their work under exploitative conditions on Florida sugar farms.

Hahamovitch situates the H-2 program within a tripartite global history of guest worker programs. The first phase, from the 1880s to the 1920s, produced the "grandfather programs" to import agricultural and mining labor, distinct from indentured labor schemes in that imported workers were legally and spatially segregated from local labor, and were forbidden from settling when their labor contracts expired (p. 17). In the second phase, from the 1940s until the 1970s, the guest worker program model proliferated, particularly throughout Europe to cope with the labor shortages of postwar reconstruction. In the third phase, beginning with the oil shocks of 1973, the Middle East largely replaced Europe as the major migrant-receiving area. Migration programs diversified to recruit highly skilled professionals in addition to laborers for "dirty, dangerous and difficult work" (p. 5); the programs became increasingly feminized and the migrant-sending nation took on a far more active and enthusiastic role in exporting its workers. Hahamovitch contends that the H-2 program straddles these second and third phases both temporally and in kind. Although it originally began as an agricultural labor program, by 1986 it had expanded to include the "maid trade" and high-tech workers. She does not make explicit mention of the significant role of the Jamaican government in administering and lobbying for the program, although its enthusiasm for the program is a recurring theme, despite the systemic mistreatment of workers.

The purpose of introducing this global history is to evaluate the H-2 program in comparison to European guest work programs, an ambitious move that is never fully realized. Hahamovitch notes the divergent roles of the state between U.S. and European programs; the H-2's costs and control over workers were largely outsourced to employers, whereas European governments largely retained those responsibilities. Hahamovitch explains the European programs' relative protections for workers on this state control, as well as the concerted efforts of European unions to fight for guest worker rights. In the United States, unions tended to identify H-2 workers as an enemy in the fight to protect the jobs and wages of domestic farmworkers. This argument is largely relegated to a sidebar, however, and the European programs are never examined in much detail.

Among the book's great strengths is Hahamovitch's wealth of interview and archival data. In addition to extensive searches through U.S. and British archives, she recovered a wealth of Jamaican documents not accessible through their national archives, acquired by lawyers "as part of the discovery process in a long series of lawsuits" by guest workers against the cane companies that employed them (p. 10). Hahamovitch also spoke to veterans of the program over four field visits to Jamaica, and makes extensive use of the reports and recollections

of Walter Comrie, a white Jamaican liaison officer who oversaw Jamaican placements for over twenty years.

The mix of official evidence and personal accounts illuminates how individual agency influenced the unfolding of the program at a structural level. She recounts how Florida tomato farmer L. L. Chandler led the push by U.S. agricultural sectors to import Caribbean farmworkers to undermine the bargaining power and wages of domestic migrants. The personalities of liaison officers Herbert MacDonald, Comrie, and Harold Edwards shaped the relationship between the Jamaican government and U.S. farmers. Willard Wirz, secretary of labor under President Kennedy, ended the Mexican Bracero program and cut H-2 certifications out of a personal conviction that guest worker programs were perpetuating American unemployment. While the structural tensions between nation and capital created guest worker programs, their sources of labor, conditions of work, and public legitimacy were shaped by the agential decisions of employers and administrators.

Hahamovitch's social history approach also illuminates a history of worker resistance within the program, ranging from workers' early assertion of labor and social rights during the wartime program, to the "secret" strikes in Florida sugarcane fields throughout the 1960s and the legal battle in the 1980s for back wages and legal residency. These various acts are characterized as brave but mostly futile; unlike farmers, government officials, or liaison officers, workers lacked the power or tools to effectively challenge their position within the program. Collective attempts to challenge work conditions "from below" were thwarted by rivalries between H-2 migrant-sending countries, as well as animosities between H-2 migrants and domestic farmworkers. Resistance was further undermined by a curious paradox: "guestworkers who resented their treatment and guestworkers who desperately wanted to return to the United States were not separate people" (p. 11). The desperation accompanying structural unemployment and mass poverty in Jamaica made farmwork in the United States an attractive opportunity few men were willing to endanger, no matter how degrading the work or exploitative the terms.

The unevenness of agency in Hahamovitch's account bears closer investigation. The labor shortages in the United States that justified the H-2 program's creation are extensively explored as political constructions. Their existence and "real" size are problematized and debated over the history of the program. Meanwhile, the labor surplus in Jamaica that created the seemingly bottomless pool of willing workers is unquestioned as part of the structural reality of the island. Evoking classical dependency theory arguments, Jamaica's enthusiasm for the program is repeatedly located in this structural desperation. It would be worth examining the ways in which the Jamaican economy is also politically constructed, and to interrogate more carefully how the social position of Jamaican elites shaped their outlook on the program. Hahamovitch's account tends to flatten Caribbean social hierarchies in this regard.

No Man's Land stakes out important new directions for migration scholarship, and provides a timely intervention into policy debates on immigration reform. The outline of a global history of guest worker programs is an important step in moving beyond the traditional methodological nationalism of labor studies. The incorporation of narrative evidence "from below" adds nuance and analytical heft to structuralist accounts of labor migration. Her incorporation of the perspectives of migrant-sending states is nascent, but complements the work of Robyn Magalit Rodriguez and Rhacel Salazar Parrenas. *No Man's Land* will no doubt inspire further explorations in this vein.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the list discussion logs at:
http://h-net.msu.edu/cgi-bin/logbrowse.pl.

Citation: James Braun. Review of Hahamovitch, Cindy, *No Man's Land: Jamaican Guestworkers in America and the Global History of Deportable Labor*. H-Caribbean, H-Net Reviews. June, 2013.
URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=38927

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.