

## **Thirst and hardship in Baja California: The lives of those who produce the vegetables we eat**

### **Review by Francisco Arqueros**

Zlalniski, Christian (2019) *Made in Baja: the lives of farmworkers and growers behind Mexico's transnational agricultural boom*, University of California Press: Oakland, CA, [256] pp. ISBN 9780520300637

¿What do we know about the fresh vegetables that we buy from the shelf in our local supermarket? Where do they come from, who has produced them, and under which labor and social conditions? Zlalniski's monograph *Made in Baja*, provides answers to those questions, particularly for US consumers. His intention is to unveil the basic pillars of the production regime of export agriculture in San Quintin, Baja California (p. 207), which he does by relying on 'case stories' and 'unfiltered voices' (p. 19).

Zlalniski carried out ethnographic fieldwork for about a decade (he is not precise about the time span), mainly during the summer months, hanging around the 'colonias' where these workers, mainly from the Triqui and Mixtec ethnic groups from Southern Mexico, have *permanently* settled. Interestingly, growers and government still construe them as migrant, temporary laborers who do not belong to the land in spite of a number of decades of settlement, an experience the author conceptualizes as 'new territorialization.' The question here is the externalization of the reproduction of labor (schools, health, infrastructures, etc.) and the reduction of labor value. A 'migrant' and 'temporary' labor force is a very cheap, desperate, and docile labor force for growers. Their 'unfiltered voices' speak of an abusive labor regime on farms, low wages, and lack of incomes to maintain their families. To meet their needs, they must resort to temporary migration to the US, engage in informal economic activities, and access state social programs for poor families.

In that regard they constitute a transnational class of laborers moving back and forth across the US-Mexico border.

Chapter three looks into how they are recruited through labor contractors to work in San Quintin's commercial agriculture: in the 1980s and 1990s in the South of Mexico, when they were housed in labor camps; later, in the 'colonias.' Chapter four focuses on the workplace regimes linked to previous cultivation in open fields and now in greenhouses, and quality standards demanded by supermarkets are shown to have a decisive role in the way the work process has been organized. Chapter five deals with workers' resistance to exploitation: everyday forms of resistance on farms and open and collective resistance as in the case of the 2015 labor strike that paralyzed the area. Chapter six takes the story outside the workplace and into the local communities that these farmworkers have created. This chapter throws light on how this labor force is reproduced and how farmworkers struggle for decent living conditions such as access to water. Another point is that resistance to capital is not only generated and articulated in the workplace but that the formation of class identity also relies heavily on community building in the 'colonias': struggles for citizenship rights are as important as struggles for labor rights. In that context, farmworkers have created new independent, social movement unions to articulate their demands. Finally, the author includes a chapter (seven) on the unequal access of different growers to water and between farmers and the communities of workers, inequalities that are reinforced by government policies. Farmworkers' need for water to live is placed at the bottom end of the government's priorities, while the need of water for export agriculture is placed at the top. In that context, the author underlines the 'ecological violence' of commercial farming and its predatory nature.

*Made in Baja* also constitutes a journey in historical political economy in line with the anthropological perspective of Wolf, Mintz and Roseberry, whom Zolniski acknowledges (p. 207). There is a particular focus on 'asymmetrical and uneven economic and social processes.' To understand the lives of farmworkers it is important to know how commercial export agriculture has developed and has created a transnational class of workers. Chapters one and two focus on local growers and transnational corporations like Driscoll, and how the agricultural development in the area of San Quintin is the product of a change in Mexican development policies. One question is, why Baja? How was a desert and unpopulated land with scarce access to water and no infrastructure chosen to be developed as a center for commercial agriculture for export?

The North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), and changes in Mexican law to allow foreign capital to buy or rent communal land attracted US agrarian capital in search for cheap labor just across the border. Insufficient access to water (based on wells), technology, expertise and markets had hampered attempts by Mexican governments to develop the area with small farmers up to the 1970s. From then on, the priorities of agrarian Mexican policy switched to high value crops like tomatoes and berries, which was achieved by local farmers establishing links with Californian growers in informal ways (commission system) or informally renting their lands to them (an illegal practice if done formally). In the 1980s, some large-scale commercial agriculture (US firms like A.B.C Farm) started to cultivate tomatoes in open fields. These types of farms had access to advanced technology, expertise, financing, and markets, which created a class polarization between them and local growers. Small growers either became marginal due to lack of access to markets, water, or subsidized government loans; or established business arrangements with US brokers. However, the depletion of aquifers and a revolt in the labor camps at the end of the 1990s ended ABC Farm and its model of agricultural development. Water shortages led to a 50 per cent reduction of the growing surface of fresh produce (from 10.000 to 5.000 hectares). However, a major structural change followed as capital was not willing to leave the region, and it switched to greenhouses, more water efficient and more productive. A hectare can produce around 100 tons of tomatoes in greenhouses against 50 tons in open fields, but more than that greenhouses allow for production off-season. Water scarcity was solved by constructing desalination plants. These changes pushed the level of investment very high and local growers could only compete by establishing partnerships with US capital, such as contract growing or business associations (p. 61-67), although some local independent growers also appeared.

On the other hand, the unfiltered voices of the workers illustrate experiences of survival, exploitation, resistance, and struggles for a better life, and Zolniski on his part manages to unveil the pillars on which this type of commercial agriculture for export rests, within the framework of neoliberal policies. The book shows the ambiguous face and the human and ecological costs of cultivating fresh produce in poor countries to export to rich countries in a globalized world when profits come first. The book is enhanced by an appendix on policy recommendations, a good exercise in applied anthropology, which gives further voice to the demands from below regarding good labor and social practices, water and living issues.

However, it is not clear what contribution the book makes to anthropological theory, or whether there was any intention in that regard. There are some attempts, like the concept ‘new territorialization,’ but it seems that the intention was to fill a vacuum: the lack of ethnographic studies on the impact of export agriculture in Baja California (p. 5).

Another question has to do with the methodology followed to carry out the research and present the material. The ethnographic data presented in chapters one to five (on growers and the labor regime on farms) come from interviews with growers and workers. Participant observation, on the other hand, constitutes the base for most of chapters six and seven. There is nothing wrong with combination of different research strategies. However, participant observation usually leads to richer and thicker description. In fact, chapters six and seven, the product of the author’s hanging around in the ‘colonias,’ constitute the most compelling part of the book. The author was there. As a reader, one wonder whether the ethnography as a whole would have gained with a shorter and more condense text on farm work and growers, where the author did not hang around, and a longer and more detailed text on the lives of farmworkers in the ‘colonias,’ where he did hang around.

All in all, this is an important and recommended book for anthropologists with a political economy orientation and interested in agriculture and capitalism beyond the topic of peasant studies.

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