

## NOTE DI LETTURA

Piro V., *Migrant Farmworkers in «Plastic Factories». Investigating Work-Life Struggles*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021

di Ben Rogaly\*

I write this review in the UK, where, at the time of writing in February 2023, four supermarket retailers started rationing how many tomatoes and other salad items shoppers can buy. This comes on top of a broader combination of crises affecting people's access to food - evident since the 2008 bailout of the banks and worsened by subsequent political decisions that have seen declining real wages, skyrocketing rents and, since Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022, a huge spike in energy costs. A crisis of household incomes sits alongside the drastic reductions in public services that have taken place over the same period and the looming existential threat posed by the climate emergency.

In the winter, when they are available, many salad items in UK supermarkets have long tended to be sourced from southern Europe - from sites on the Mediterranean coast (mostly in Spain) which look, from above like seas of plastic. *Migrant farmworkers in 'plastic factories': investigating work-life struggles* is based on the study of a particular enclave of vegetable production in plastic greenhouses: the Fascia Costiera Trasformata - or Transformed Littoral Strip (TLS) on the southern coast of Sicily. The book is an account of how small-scale growers and the companies that prepare and pack salad produce went about seeking to recruit and retain wage workers over the period 2013 to 2019 and on what conditions. It is perhaps centrally the story of how, in spite of the interlocking structural oppressions arrayed against them, those workers could and sometimes did find ways - individually and collectively - to make small gains in job security and wages and to reduce the damage such work was doing to their bodies.

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The book is skilfully wrought and a rewarding read. Alongside pictures of workers living and working conditions, Valeria Piro uses the neat and succinct format demanded of a Palgrave Pivot author to tell her quite complex story in an engaging and digestible style. Research for *Migrant Farmworkers* began in 2013 when Piro, then a PhD student at the University of Milan, moved to Vittoria, a town of 63,000 people in the TLS, and made it the base for her fieldwork.

Coincidentally Giuliana Sanò, who was doing a PhD in Anthropology at the University of Messina, had also moved to Vittoria to do her fieldwork at the same time. The two doctoral researchers decided to join forces and work together, taking up a variety of different types of positions in greenhouses, a vegetable packing shed, a migrant health clinic and a trade union office, and spending ‘long periods of observation’ (p. 12) with farmworkers away from the work context - in public spaces in the city, as well as in places of worship, cafes and discos. They also shadowed a trader in the buying and selling of fruits and vegetables - publishing a joint article on this together in the journal *Meridiana*. Sano’s book *Fabbriche di plastica: Il lavoro nell’agricoltura industriale* was published in 2018 by Ombre Corte in Verona. Piro’s *Migrant farmworkers* is built on a combination of the initial jointly-conducted fieldwork and later research visits by Piro stretching up to 2019.

Chapter One locates Piro’s project as part of a wider body of research on paid work in the agri-food sector. It sketches out the restructuring of the sector from the 1980s with the «concentration of capital and land» (p. 2) and the process through which «migrant labour became a pivotal factor» (p. 3). The chapter also deftly explains the importance of Chris Smith’s theory of the double indeterminacy of labour power to the study given the insights it enables into struggles over workers’ effort and their use of potential ‘exit’ (leaving a job) as a form of agency. At the same time, the reader also learns how Piro writes against any false homogenisation of people working in farms, instead paying due attention to social divisions *among* workers, intersectional inequalities, different subjective experiences and actual and potential clashes of interest. An important quality of *Migrant farmworkers* is the capacity to keep these wider trends, theories and concepts in clear sight while making a deep dive into the specifics of migration regimes, rural social and economic transformation and workplace struggles over pay and conditions in the greenhouses producing tomatoes, aubergines and courgettes and associated packing houses in the TLS.

The freshness of Piro’s writing style is maintained in Chapter Two with its focus on the greenhouses and packing house where she and Sanò worked for short periods of time. Here, Piro briefly sets out the numerical dominance of

small and medium size businesses and gendered patterns of recruitment - packing house workforces being predominantly made up of women while «green-houses are commonly represented as a male work environment» (p. 31). With deft brushstrokes, Piro also uses the chapter to introduce the reader to the increasing importance of international migrant workers in TLS tomato, courgette and aubergine production and distribution, beginning with a growth in the number of Tunisian workers arriving in the 1970s, through the employment of larger numbers of Romanian men and women in the 2000s and nationals of middle eastern countries affected by uprisings and war in the early 2010s. By 2013, for example, half of the farmworkers in Ragusa district of the TLS were foreign nationals. The mix of nationalities and of different kinds of regular and irregular statuses mapped on to a segmentation of living and working conditions, «hampering the possibilities of establishing organized forms of solidarity and jeopardizing trade union activities» (pp. 28-29).

Piro's reflections on her own and Sanò's positionality as «two young high-educated Italian female researchers» (pp. 32-33) allows the reader into some of the gendered sites of contestation and friendship with which they became involved. Chapter Two is made all the more readable in part because Piro wisely takes up the advice of Erving Goffman in an article *On fieldwork* that «The first day you'll see more than you'll ever see again. And you'll see things that you won't see again» (p. 34). Piro puts particular weight on the initial impressions the worksites made on her. The «physical and mental stress» experienced by both Piro and Sanò were «accentuated by the fact that our bodies were not (and did not become) fit or accustomed enough for the required level of physical strain». This in itself was a source of insight, «allow[ing] us to focus in particular on the body, considered both as an *object* and as a *means* of our ethnographic inquiry» (p. 33).

Chapter Three of *Migrant farmworkers* engages in satisfying depth with the nuanced complexities of how employers and workers came to agreements about contracts. This included whether or not there would be a contract at all. Just as there was a mix of statuses among workers in relation to Italian immigration law, so also there was a mix of contractual statuses. The two sets of statuses intersected, as Piro goes on to show. While «farms usually hire a small number of stable workers (indeed they indenture them through a temporary contract)» they also «at the same time, rely on casualized day labourers». Yet where a particular working arrangement lay on the continuum from informality to formality «affect[ed] day labourers differently according to their nationality and immigration status». For example, Karim, a greenhouse worker encountered in Chapter Two did not have regular legal status to live and work in Italy. When he and his boss's daughter got married, this

was also a route to residence and to ‘regularizing his legal status’ but it also meant he had bound «his future to a life and an occupation that he strongly dislikes» (p. 41).

In such circumstances employers held the upper hand. «[S]ituations of transition from irregularity to regularity often depended on the employers’ “goodwill” to formalize pre-existing work relationships». Casualized workers faced other structural disadvantages: in one example, Piro narrates how workers were called up for a shift with just twenty minutes notice. Such short periods of notice that work was available combined with workers having to wait around for long periods. And employers’ segmentation of living and working conditions using not just different legal status but also «racialized scripts» (p. 64) based on nationality led to those scripts being internalised by workers. Yet, there remained times and spaces where workers could experience joy, humour and a degree of togetherness. Even though these did not shift structural inequalities - and Piro is not at all romantic or celebratory about them - they are important observations. One time at the packing house Piro found herself among workers who were hanging around waiting for produce to be delivered so they could start work:

I was surprised that the atmosphere outside the packinghouse was actually relaxed: women were chatting kindly, laughing, enjoying their coffees, asking questions about our presence there; no one seemed to be stressed out about waiting for more than one hour before starting work, and this unpaid time was filled with conversations and camaraderie (p. 63)

If immigration law and workers’ struggles for regularization were one effect on whether or not they sought or were granted a contract of employment and on what terms, Italian national welfare policy was responsible for the distance many workers experienced between the contractual terms they signed up for and their actual working conditions. Piro shows how it was common practice for employers to register the employment of a worker with the National Social Security Institute for many fewer days than they actually worked. This enabled the workers to obtain unemployment benefit for some of the days they had actually been at work, and thus, in effect, for employers to receive a state subsidy on wages. As workers weighed up how much they valued their mobility between employers, regions, even countries within Europe versus the advantages of having a contract that could lead to both regularised immigration status and welfare benefits, some workers also found ways of «[bend]ing formal rules and the welfare system to their advantage» (p. 81).

When Piro turns in Chapter Four to the struggle over wages, the reader is left in no doubt that negotiations between horticultural employers and their workers in TLS did not revolve around the money wage alone, but also around the question of whether a certain amount of effort, including a certain pace of work, was required in order to qualify for it. If it *was* required then employers were effectively creating piece rate working arrangements even if they were not calling them such. Further, accommodation - key to the social reproduction of workers - also became part of the package. If accommodation was provided on site, for example, some employers would use that to justify paying lower wages. Because on-site accommodation was correlated with nationality and immigration status, it played a part in the racialized segmentation of workers of different nationalities «with the actual purpose of fuelling competition, in order to intensify the work pace and repress wage demand» (pp. 88-89).

The conditions of employment in horticulture took their toll on workers' bodies, the subject of Chapter Five. This was not just a question of getting insufficient rest. On the contrary, being kept waiting and then having to rush into an intensive work situation could lead to harm: «The very nature of the casualized work deeply affects workers' bodies (...) the swing between peaks of work and bouts of unemployment» leads to «never-trained-enough bodies and high levels of stress and mental suffering» (p. 115). Farmworkers, whom Piro worked alongside for a short period as a colleague and others she interviewed, along with her experience of working in a health clinic dealing with injuries at work, revealed a high incidence of carpal tunnel syndrome among packing house workers and greenhouse workers' disproportionate «breathing problems and lung infections» (p. 128). Interestingly there were collective approaches to maintaining bodily health and integrity, including «the practice of collectively slowing down the work pace (...) as a method to counter the employers' demand to work faster» and farmworkers collectively learning «how to domesticate their everyday routines in order to eschew high physical risks and to preserve themselves from exhaustion» (p. 135).

Overall *Migrant farmworkers* is an impressive book that deserves a wide readership. In a concluding chapter Piro brings together the different kinds of struggles that she has so acutely observed and narrated in the preceding pages. There is no ducking here the way the corporate environmental food regime has driven more intensive and insecure employment conditions in TLS horticulture and how these are reinforced by racialization, harassment of women workers, an immigration regime characterised by the threat of deportation and an inept social security system. Yet Piro's ability to get deeply involved through workplace ethnography and through a non-hierarchical

approach to building research relationships meant that she has also been able to see and to tell stories of how, at times, workers acted both individually and together in their own interests to shift an aspect of these structural disadvantages to their own favour. In doing so she has been true to the plea of her workmates-cum-research participants to «pay attention» and «not forget their life stories» (p. 34). Piro has also provided a valuable resource for the community of scholar-activists engaged in coalitional struggles for just employment conditions for food workers as states clamber to deal with food shortages in the growing climate emergency.