Ismael García-Colón, *Colonial Migrants at the Heart of Empire: Puerto Rican Workers on U.S. Farms*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2020. xvii + 326 pp. (Paper US\$29.95)

If the “perfect” farmworker for U.S. agriculture was a noncitizen immigrant whose wages, movement, and ability to organize could be sharply curtailed by the threat of deportation, then Puerto Rican migrants were decidedly “imperfect” (p. 2). Occupying an ambiguous place as both U.S. citizens and colonial subjects, migrant Puerto Rican farmworkers had to navigate a perilous terrain of agrarian capitalism, the colonial state, and “alien citizenship” (p. 21). Ismael García-Colón’s new book offers an exhaustive account of this terrain as it was configured by state and economic actors and experienced by Puerto Rican farmworkers themselves.

As in García-Colón’s earlier book, *Land Reform in Puerto Rico*, the narrative anchor is the creation, implementation, and repercussions of a law and legal regime central to the formation of Puerto Rico as a modern colony. In this book it is the Farm Labor Program (FLP) of 1948 and the agency that oversaw it, the Migrant Division (MD), that occupies that role. García-Colón’s history of the MD and the farmworkers whose migration it managed challenges common perspectives in the literatures on Puerto Rican migration and rural labor history. While the former has too often favored histories of urban migrants over farmworkers, the latter has almost totally overlooked Puerto Rican farmworkers, and consequently, the role of colonialism in U.S. agricultural labor.

García-Colón’s ambitious corrective attempts to do justice both to the local experiences of migrant workers, mostly in the northeastern United States, and to the social fields that shaped them. Reflecting this, the book is structured into two large sections, which are relatively distinct in their tone, concepts, and sources. The first section is a top-down political history of the FLP, with chapters on U.S. guest worker programs and Puerto Rican citizenship, the role of the FLP in Puerto Rico’s modernization project, and the MD’s position in the colonial and federal government. The key to understanding the FLP, García-Colón argues, is seeing it as an element in midcentury Puerto Rican state formation, where it began as another experiment in the “social laboratory” of modernization, intended to alleviate rural poverty and high unemployment on the island—both attributed to “overpopulation”—by directly managing labor migration (pp. 69, 71). Drawing on administrative and legislative records, he shows how government officials succeeded in carving out a space in the U.S. federal government and, finally, in creating and enforcing a generous labor contract for workers and winning the requirement that growers give preference to Puerto Rican migrants over noncitizen guest workers.

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In the second section, García-Colón places the reader alongside farmworkers in their communities and in the fields where they worked. In more textured prose—and using a substantial body of oral history interviews and even Sidney Mintz’s anthropological field notes—he teases out the motivations and memories of the migrants, gives a powerful picture of labor camps as “total institutions” where workers were subjected to discipline and surveillance, and details the “sites of social reproduction” in neighboring rural towns where workers’ feelings of estrangement could, and did, erupt into protest or into efforts to organize outside the terms of the MD (pp. 161, 179).

What ultimately ties the two sections together are “social fields of power,” a theory of social relationships derived from anthropologist William Roseberry that is resolutely local in focus but understands local positions as configured within and “internalizing” larger networks of power, in this case, colonialism and capitalist agriculture. The disparity of the two sections makes sense in this light, with the first laying out the farmworkers’ social fields and the second showing how they occupied, navigated, and contested them. What this approach does remarkably well is to foreground the constitutive ironies of Puerto Rican farmworkers’ position. As citizens, they could make demands without threat of deportation; as colonial subjects, they were represented by an agency that enforced their contract, responded to grievances, and intervened on their behalf. But it was precisely these factors that made them undesirable to growers, who attempted to circumvent hiring them in favor of deportable guest workers and, when that was not possible, to shortchange the wages, food, and living conditions required by their contracts. García-Colón’s excellent book shows how these ironies made the position of Puerto Rican farmworkers compellingly distinct from that of most U.S. farmworkers. Although the book’s appeal is likely to be limited to specialists, it is a significant and necessary intervention.

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