

# **Philip Martin, *Importing Poverty? Immigration and the Changing Face of Rural America*, Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 2009, 242 p.**

## **Book review**

Can you identify one trend which has considerably shaped the socio-economic image of rural America, and more specifically of California? You would be hard pressed to find a force more influential yet controversial as migration. In his book, Philip Martin asks and answers the following question: “Does the US risk creating a rural underclass in order to get a seasonal farm workforce?”. He wrote it in order to raise awareness of the urgent need of a change in immigration due to a high influx of poor immigrants. In that respect, the intended audience is not only represented by scholar-type of people who want to learn more about this topic, but also, and perhaps mainly, by policy makers, who have the power to influence and shape immigration legislation.

Agriculture in California attracts the high numbers of immigrants who are to be found in the state. They are poor, uneducated and mainly of Hispanic origin. Indeed, American agriculture is home to around 2.5 million workers on an annual basis. Most of these farmworkers work for periods of less than six months on strawberries, broccoli, lettuce, cauliflower and other fruit and vegetables plantations. Amongst these workers, very high numbers are undocumented and can work in this type of job for around ten years. Starting from these facts, Philip Martin wonders what the impact of immigration on rural America is.

Philip Martin is a professor of agricultural and resource economics at the University of California, Davis. He is also chair of the UC Comparative Immigration and Integration Program and editor of the quarterlies *Migration News* and *Rural Migration News*. Additionally, he is the author of *Managed Labor Migration in the Twenty-First century*. Needless to say, he is a specialist in the field of migration and agriculture and his views on the topic are highly relevant for anyone who embarks on the study of any of these two mainly from an economic point of view.

Philip Martin offers a holistic approach of immigration in rural America by looking at how agribusiness, immigration policy, welfare system, demographics and economics are linked and interact to each other. Based on a variety of relevant sources of both primary and secondary origin such as academic papers, press releases, political speeches, farmers’ opinions, US Census Data and other legal texts, the author looks at the impact of poor immigrants on rural America. After a thorough analysis, his argument is that the current rural labour model cannot be sustainable in the long run. This is backed up by the fact that the current business-labour model only attracts poor and uneducated immigrants who are caught in a vicious circle of poverty and welfare dependency. They are paid very little money, which means that they cannot afford to send their children to colleges. This triggers a new generation of farmworkers who can only generate the same type of citizens. As a result, the circle is unlikely to be broken due to path dependency. Very low wages are the reason why farmers prefer (undocumented) immigrants, as opposed to American workers, who would only work for a decent wage.

In Philip Martin’s view, a solution would be to “regularize the farm workforce and rationalize the farm labor market” (p.180). However, regularization of farmworkers is not likely to be wanted by farmers, since it would trigger higher wages for workers. The solution to problems he

puts forward is mechanization of agriculture. For Martin, mechanization is a labor-saving process which would increase workers' wages because there would be fewer people employed. This means that immigrants could be replaced by Americans who would be happy to work for higher wages. Another solution is the introduction of higher return bonuses to incentivise migrants to return to their countries of origin after a certain number of years spent in the US.

I enjoyed reading the book mainly because I got the chance to familiarise myself with the issues surrounding agricultural corporations and immigrants in rural America. However, my background in sociology and international development pushes me to adopt a more 'open doors' view regarding immigration. As a result, I would have preferred if the author would have emphasised a little more on migrants' experiences. In his book, Martin tries to come up with a formula which would make migration work for the US from an economic point of view, to help it become prosperous. He does not discuss the lack of employment security migrants face and their status as precariat.

Socio-economic problems faced by immigrants in rural America are very important because of their high numbers, yet Martin only briefly mentions that migrant farmworkers are economically insecure. Given the lack of job security migrant farmworkers face, it is worth mentioning the issues surrounding migrants' economic insecurity due to job insecurity. Indeed, the book only focuses on the negative impact of immigration on rural America, without even trying to empathize with the migrants whose only choice of survival is emigration to a country where they can get a wage which would not make them rich, but would allow them to live.

Employment is a source of stability. Job insecurity is therefore likely to reduce opportunities for social participation. As a result, the circle of welfare dependency immigrant farmworkers are caught in is due to the seasonal nature of their job and to the fact that they are undocumented. These two factors are mutually reinforcing. As in any other immigration country, employment insecurity is to be found mainly amongst low skilled, uneducated or irregular immigrants who are likely to find themselves in 3D jobs (Dull, Dangerous and Dirty). The non-regular status triggers lack of control over jobs, which emphasizes the precarious status immigrants experience.

By focusing on negative aspects immigration brings to the US, such as low wages, overcrowding in housing or low level of English, Martin only briefly mentions the fact that farmworkers take the jobs Americans would not do. Again, he does not seem to acknowledge the role of migrants - to make the 'low economy' work.

By writing this book using a highly original and coherent style, the author is trying to give information to the readers about the current factors which affect rural America. He takes this one step further and tries to convince the reader of the validity of his arguments in an aim to try and change immigration policy, which transforms his book almost into a forceful manifesto. Martin's thesis - that the US is importing poverty - is supported by strong evidence. However, even if he does provide an alternative to how to stop the US from becoming motherland to poor immigrants, he does not provide a solution for how to stop people from emigrating. This could only be done through a more homogenous lifestyle which would involve the empowerment of the poor 'South'.

I would recommend this book to anyone who wants to learn something more about not only immigration in rural America, but about immigration into America as a whole.

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