

American Dreaming: Immigrant Life on the Margins

Sarah J. Mahler. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995. 268 pages.
reviewed by Sharryn Kasmir & Lisa Beneventano

During the 1980s, when many regions of the United States suffered severe recession, Long Island's defense industries moderated the local effects of economic crisis, and a low-wage labor market in ancillary industry and in services flourished. In *American Dreaming: Immigrant Life on the Margins*, Sarah J. Mahler focuses an ethnographic lens on the Central and South American immigrants who filled these low-paying jobs in Long Island's affluent suburbs. Their experiences are filled with dissatisfaction and disillusionment.

Mahler understands migration as resulting from a combination of push and pull factors, and rather than simply telling the stories of her informants' experiences in the U.S., she sets out the circumstances in their home countries that led them to make the expensive and dangerous decisions to emigrate without visas (Introduction to Chapter 3). From this vantage point, we see important differences among immigrants despite their shared undocumented status: Salvadorans left their country to escape a terrible civil war (1979-1992.) For the most part, the Salvadorans settled on Long Island came from peasant communities, and their passages to the U.S. were harrowing. Borrowing money from family and community members, they made their way overland to Mexico where they paid *coyotes* hundreds and even thousands of dollars to guide them across the border. Many were cheated by their guides and arrested by the Immigration and Naturalization Service, and some died in transit. The costs and brutality involved in arriving on Long Island transformed them. The Colombians, Chileans, and Peruvians Mahler studied were more likely to come from cities and to be educated, and their motivations for emigrating were different. They left soaring inflation and plummeting real wages that denied them economic opportunity. These chapters are gripping and show the human toll of the U.S.' restrictive immigration policy.

These stories of border crossing were told to Mahler during her anthropological fieldwork on Long Island. After collecting 350 questionnaires and conducting 42 extensive interviews, she took up residence in a town on the north shore's "Gold Coast." She lived for six months among Central and South Americans who worked in the peripheral factories spawned by defense industry sub-contracts; who cleaned the houses, cared for the children and tended the gardens of middle-income and wealthy families; and who did construction or landscaping as day laborers for Long Island contractors.

In Chapters 3 through 9, Mahler analyzes the expectations and disillusionment that shape immigrants' lives. Prior to emigrating, her informants heard the dollar amounts of U.S. wages and translated this into purchasing power. Salvadorans imagined that after a period of hard work in the U.S., they would save enough money to secure a stable future for their families and would return to their villages. South Americans imagined the middle-class lives that eluded them at home. None had figured how inadequate their incomes would be given the high cost of living on Long Island. Though they shared overcrowded housing and spent little on themselves, they were hard pressed to repay those who financed their journey to the U.S. and to send money home. The strain of these impossible commitments is a constant feature of their lives. Yet they send home snapshots of themselves posing on the expensive cars of strangers and hide the realities of their impoverishment, thereby encouraging others' American dreams. Mahler's informants feel alienated from American society, but they see their exploitation as distinct from the "real America."

Mahler's most important finding is that, due to their social marginalization, immigrants turn their resentments on each other. In their effort to meet all of their financial responsibilities, they have little money for sharing, socializing, or mutual aid among their fellow migrants. Their passage to America means the loss of customs of reciprocity and sense of community that characterized their lives across the border, especially in rural El Salvador. Moreover, they do not think that their compatriots are *unable* to give but believe they are *unwilling* to give. A major source of their disappointment with life in America is what they interpret as others' jealousy and competitiveness. The few opportunities they are able to create are within the immigrant community; the enterprising among them buy a used car and run a taxi service, rent an apartment and

sublease rooms for profit, and, at the high end, open immigration-related businesses, such as shipping and remittance services. This means that profits are made at the expense of other immigrants.

Mahler argues that these facts must be understood in the context of a two-tiered economy in which Central and South Americans' undocumented status limits them to low-wage, precarious, under-the-table jobs. She also shows how the immigration reform legislation of 1996 further marginalizes them and makes them vulnerable to exploitation by employers. However, this is not how immigrants understand their situations. They blame each other. As Mahler points out, finding fault within their own community echoes the American cultural theme of "blaming the victim" and ironically reflects their assimilation of American values. Although these are significant and stark insights, one criticism of the book is that by assigning them so much relative weight — indeed, at the expense of exploring other dimensions of immigrants' experience, including their relationships with employers — Mahler offers too narrow a range of interpretation.

Nonetheless, *American Dreaming* is a very good book that provides a valuable case study of immigrants and the low-wage economy on Long Island. Apart from a moderately difficult section on models of immigrant economic integration in the Introduction, it is highly accessible to a general audience and has rich detail for specialized readers. Anyone interested in labor issues on Long Island will appreciate this thoughtful book.

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