Book Review:


Reviewed by Mat Zalk.

John Chalcraft’s *The Invisible Cage* portrays the human story behind the vast migration of Syrian workers to and from Lebanon during the past six decades. Rejecting two paradigms through which social scientists have traditionally viewed labor migration—Marxism and traditional labor economics—Chalcraft convincingly argues that a more complex web of hegemonic factors have led Syrians to seek work in Lebanon. Political ties between Lebanon and Syria, mutual economic dependence, and factors of class and societal structure combined to create individual stories that have been overlooked in explaining migration in the past. *The Invisible Cage*, drawing on extensive personal interviews, explores some of these stories, successfully portraying a human aspect and undermining (often) politically motivated immigration statistics that have long been the subject of debate. By shedding light upon the hegemonic controls that led Syrians to work in, and sometimes flee from, Lebanon since the 1950s, Chalcraft explores a largely unexplored history.

The book’s introduction outlines four reasons why the story of Syrian labor migration to Lebanon differs from the usual pattern. First, owing to liberal migration laws between the two countries and a lower cost of living in Syria, a majority of guest workers returned to Syria after completing periods of work in Lebanon. In other words, a revolving door that allowed Syrian laborers easy entry and exit to and from Lebanon made permanent settlement in Lebanon unlikely. Second, Syrian state support of agriculture meant that unpaid female domestic and farm labor created an important incentive for women to remain in Syria and continue to engage in productive work. Third, the Syrian military had a “major and sometimes heavy-handed military presence (during 1976 to 2005)” in Lebanon, even though it was the poorer, labor-sending country. Finally, the Lebanese labor market was relatively free, meaning it relied on personal relationships rather than employment agencies and rigid contracts. In the five chapters that follow, Chalcraft elaborates on these four points, arguing that they collectively formed hegemonic control over Syrian labor migration to Lebanon.

Relying mainly on secondary sources, Chalcraft describes in great detail the historical factors that led to Syrian outmigration until the end of World War II. The Ottoman Land Codes of the mid 19th-century worked toward the prohibition of community ownership of farmland and grazing rights, and required individuals to own precisely delineated properties. This created a land-owning class that made it possible to separate farmers from their means of subsistence, and instituted a dependence on a cash economy that drove Syrians to seek work abroad. Further, the move away from shared community labor linked labor and wage in a way that had not regularly existed before. Notable community members became lords over peasant sharecroppers, and commoditization of labor in the region was born. In addition, as parcels of land were divided with subsequent generations, according to inheritance laws, plots often became too small to support whole families, and individuals were pushed out to find wage labor in the growing cash economy.

Migration then began in earnest, and various forces interacted to maintain a system whereby attachment to a cash economy increased and workers “voluntarily” sold their labor to employers. Perhaps counterintuitively, it was not the landless and most impoverished who left their homes in search of work, but rather those desperately seeking to avoid the slide into landlessness. Desperation forced individuals to work for exploitative wages in the form both of in-kind payments from community or family members, and eventually cash.
Chapter two attempts to dispel the simple supply and demand rationale for labor movement, focusing instead on the many factors that led Syrians to work in Lebanon. In the 1960s and 1970s it was not simply that wages were much higher for Syrians working in Lebanon—they were—but that wage labor existed at all. In Syria labor was still greatly tied to the non-cash economy of family farms, even though families often could not produce enough to cover their needs and thus needed cash to purchase clothes, stoves and other essential items from the market. To afford these purchases, a (most often) male family member went abroad to work and remitted money to his family in Syria. Networks of transportation and employment meant workers could easily make the short trip to and from Lebanon, and finding work was easy. With a few exceptions, the border between the two neighboring countries allowed Syrian workers unencumbered movement and Lebanese employers cheap labor. It was this mutually beneficial situation that allowed Syrians to go mostly unnoticed. “Like sugar in tea” (89) Chalcraft says, they dissolved temporarily in society, working mostly conflict-free in construction, food preparation, and other menial tasks. Numbers of Syrian workers in Lebanon increased steadily from the 1940s.

Lebanon’s civil war, which lasted from 1975 to 1990, made life more difficult for Syrian workers, who faced sectarian violence at the hands of Lebanese militias and a general stigma in Lebanese society. Many left. Still, some stayed, though Israel’s 1982 invasion and emboldened Christian militias created an even more difficult situation. Familial responsibilities, financial opportunities, and job stability in Lebanon were some of the factors that kept Syrians in a violent Lebanon. Indeed, many employers still favored Syrians during this period because of their strong work ethic and low employment costs. Further, a continued strong economy, the need for war-related reconstruction, and waves of Lebanese emigration continued to draw Syrians to the country despite the formidable risks. Chalcraft’s stories of bombs dropping, children screaming, and months of unemployment during the worst of the fighting depict the humanity behind the faceless laborers that, in many ways, kept Lebanon operating during the chaos. The author hits home in Chapter 3, with vivid stories that bring to life the choices made by Syrians faced with opposition to their presence and threats to life and family. One interviewee says, “When Israel came in 1982…there were bombs falling. My baby…would get afraid and cry…from the light and noise of the bombs. So I sent the family and the kids back to Syria…My son, Michael, if he saw tanks on television, even if [what he was seeing] were kids toys, he would scream and cry” (128). Syrians faced these situations daily in their tireless search for paid work.

The 1990s saw increased Syrian control in Lebanese politics via the “Pax Syriana”, as well as a return of many Syrian workers to Lebanon. The dire economic situation in Syria and social pressures of acquisition caused this return. It should be noted that statistics on Syrian immigrants are contested, often unreliable, and may have been politically motivated depending on the source. As political winds blew back and forth, the number of Syrian workers in Lebanon was a constant point of contention. Those who supported the influx of cheap labor tended to understate numbers, while those against did the opposite. Nonetheless, it is clear that many Syrians returned to work in Lebanon. Their return highlights the extent and strength of the hegemonic forces at work. Despite hostility from the Lebanese, and a lack of basic social or employment protection, Syrians again found jobs in menial service industries. Some found work in more skilled positions, but their low cost of labor was always their main advantage in finding work; they undercut even Palestinian labor by a significant margin.

This undercutting by Syrian labor eventually led to “Instability and Exile,” as Chalcraft named his final chapter. Because of the low wages they received, Syrians were generally unable to accumulate wealth. The cost of living in Lebanon often consumed a large portion of their earnings, and what was left may have been spent in emergency medical situations or on survival during periods of unemployment. Still, Syrians came, a decision made as a “complex warp and weft of necessity, social obligation, family values, and an individual work ethic...” (153).
It was Syrian labor, however, that formed the backbone of the movement in the early 2000s for the withdrawal of Syrian troops from Lebanon. Attacks on Syrians and Syrian supporters began again, and Prime Minister Rafiq al-Hariri’s assassination in 2005, widely believed to be the work of the Syrian government, caused attacks against Syrians to become even more commonplace. Troops withdrew in April 2005, to the benefit of the Syrian workers, who felt tensions ease. Nonetheless, these workers still felt trapped between two worlds, unable to assimilate fully in either Syria or Lebanon. After years of living and working in Lebanon, most of Chalcraft’s interviewees felt that it was where they belonged, though not necessarily where they felt happiest or necessarily at home. This final point underscores the life of the labor migrant, trapped by choices made out of necessary allegiance to social and economic pressures.

Chalcraft’s research covers uncharted territory of a sensitive subject in a profound way. Nonetheless, a more substantial and even slightly more technical analysis would hammer home Chalcraft’s rejection of the application of traditional economic interpretations of the labor market to this subject. In the introduction, for example, Chalcraft writes, “The notion of labor power as a commodity contracted out by a bearer is an artifact of the economic imagination and contractarian theory guiding practice” (13). The traditional model indeed simplifies the complex factors affecting migration decisions by excluding not-easily quantifiable decisions, and Chalcraft does a thorough job explaining these factors. But the reader is still left with the feeling that the cost of labor is undoubtedly the most important element in the decision to both supply and demand labor. “Syrians found work because they were cheaper and more manipulatable than their Lebanese counterparts” (83) writes Chalcraft. In the end, the story is about salary, and to what length Syrians have been willing to go to make a living in world controlled by employers. The other hegemonic factors, while important, are secondary in the grand scheme of migration labor.

Chalcraft himself admits that he “tended to sacrifice the representativeness of the sample in favor of the depth and quality of the qualitative material” (14). His in-depth interviews paint a compelling story of the daily trials and tribulations of Syrian employees in Lebanon, including the 100-hour work week, unjustified and uncompensated terminations, and general abuse. From home to work and back, most Syrians had little time for much else, living with many other laborers in shared spaces and keeping their heads down in someone else’s society. These portraits of the lives of Syrian workers in Lebanon are made possible only by Chalcraft’s devotion to the personal story of each interview subject. The Invisible Cage is a multifaceted story that weaves history, politics, economy, and personal narratives into a compelling account of hegemony and dominance over Syrian migrant laborers. A book review cannot do justice to the many nuanced ideas covered in the 232 pages. Nonetheless, this compelling account skillfully combines the history and politics of labor migration in historic Bilad al-Sham with an insightful ethnography of those Syrians who struggled for a better life during the past six decades.

Mat Zalk is a M.A. student at the Center for Contemporary Arab Studies at Georgetown University.