

Ruth Milkman, **L.A. STORY: IMMIGRANT WORKERS AND THE FUTURE OF THE U.S. LABOR MOVEMENT**, New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2006, xiii + 244pp;

Ivan Light, **DEFLECTING IMMIGRATION: NETWORKS, MARKETS AND REGULATION IN LOS ANGELES**, New York: Russell Sage Foundation, New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2006, xiii + 246pp.

With the ever growing consciousness about – and controversy over – Latino migration to the U.S., the epicentre of U.S. immigration concerns has long since definitively shifted to those parts of the country where it all happened first: to the South-West (including Texas), to California in particular, and especially the biggest destination of all, Los Angeles. This often unloved and misunderstood metropolis offers the most extraordinary laboratory for studying the dynamics of ubiquitous informal economy, the diversification of race relations, and the emergence of new (pro- and anti-) immigration politics. These phenomena, which all centre on the Mexicans and, secondly, Central Americans who are the major source of immigration to the U.S., mean that paradigms based on East Coast cities (New York, Philadelphia, Boston) or the classic mid-west (Chicago), need to be thoroughly rethought. Both of these books about L.A. are likely to be key foundational references in the necessary reshaping of the U.S. immigration literature around these new givens. What happened first in L.A., is now repeating throughout the country, as Mexicans have arrived in ever larger numbers in new destinations, both big cities and provincial towns. The past and present dilemmas of California also signal the general inertia of national politics, neither able to embrace a rational border and regularisation

program, nor fully slam doors shut on an economy still desperate for exploitable labour in the secondary market.

Perhaps one of the most surprising facets of L.A.'s novel importance is that it has become such a hotbed of Latino political activism, indeed the locus for a renaissance in unionism in the U.S. Historically, the city is famous being an anti-union "company town": for nothing except union busting, both in the 20s and 30s, and again in the 70s and 80s, as corporations such as Wal-Mart shifted to the aggressive de-unionisation and flexibilisation of casual labour. It was a big surprise, then, in the immigration rights protests of Spring 2006, when – reacting to the growing political hostility to irregular migrants – a massive number of protesters spilt out into the L.A. streets, declaring their united Mexican and American identities, and demanding a recognition of their presence and role in American society. This recent movement is not the subject of Ruth Milkman's book, but it does provide the book cover and sits as an epilogue to the longer story she tells about the fall and rise again of the labour movement in L.A. This return has been built on unionising the new and increasingly vociferous Latino political voice in the city.

Milkman begins with the "Justice for Janitors" movement of 1990, memorialised in the Ken Loach film *Bread and Roses*, extending her analysis then to the conditions of union success and failure in other key sectors, including truck drivers, construction workers, and those who sweat away in L.A.'s booming apparel manufacturing shops. Despite traditional anti-immigrant tendencies in blue collar unionism, Americans unions, notably the American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations (AFL-CIO),

have slowly learnt that their salvation lies in mobilising the masses of low paid, often irregular immigrant workers from Latin America, who often themselves come imbued, if not with a certain left wing allegiance in their home countries, then certainly a communal solidarity in the face of poverty and exploitation. Milkman's study is a long and meticulous history, which will appeal more to the industrial relations specialist than the ethnic and racial studies scholar. She convinces that it is class rather than race that matters, although inter-racial dynamics – with anti-union Asians, or the competing workforce of African-Americans – are missing, as are the tensions and hierarchies among Latinos themselves, when Mexicans face getting undercut by new waves of immigrants from Central America. For all the optimism, this is the U.S. after all, and any small union successes have to be ranged against the massive power of organised capitalist interests to maintain and enforce conditions of exploitation. Any gains that Milkman predicts are likely to be fragile.

In the past, California has been at least as famous for its anti-immigrant tendencies. Pete Wilson's notorious proposition 187 – which tried to strip irregular migrants of access to all public services – became world famous as an exemplar of anti-immigrant nastiness, although its main effect was to send the next two decades of anti-immigrant Republicans spiralling into defeat at the hands of the state's shifting multi-racial demographics. L.A. now has a left-wing Latino mayor, Antonio Villaraigosa, who offers a cheerful thumbs up to Milkman's pro-labour book on the back cover. One doubts Villaraigosa will be writing in to endorse Ivan Light's new work. This is a book with a negative L.A. story to tell, quite in contrast to Milkman's engaging and sympathetic portrait. A dispassionate,

mechanistic analysis of the effects of pull and push pressures on this major immigrant destination, set against the background of structural shifts in globalization, Light focuses on how L.A. has, in recent years, “successfully” deflected migrants to other destinations in the U.S., through both overt and tacit hostile measures. The goal of the book is theoretical: to sharpen migration theory on explaining how and why migration stops, attacking naive demand side theories and showing how the supply side effects of networks and information take over, leading to the familiar low wage worker saturation, mismatch or negative effects on wages and poverty, that are the stock-in-trade of immigration critics. Light details four mechanisms at work in L.A.: the fall in wages relative to the rise in housing rental costs; the hostility of suburban residents at attempts to create affordable housing; the perverse consequences of liberal do-gooders (essentially he argues “left wing” priorities such as slum clearance, and improving labour rights, strip away opportunities at the bottom of the pile); and the local political enforcement of regulation against irregular employment. He also uses comparative evidence about Korean and Chinese entrepreneurs to show how Latinos have failed to create the same opportunity chains in work and daily life.

For all its brilliance, there is a certain artifice about the book’s main argument. At its heart lies a peculiar counterfactual. Although sheer numbers of Mexican-born in L.A. have continued to grow through the 80s and 90s, their *percentage* as a part of the overall U.S. population of Mexican-born has fallen sharply. Light concludes that this means more than one million Latinos who *would* have come to L.A., have thus been deflected elsewhere in the U.S. Though this might be true, it is perhaps not so puzzling that

migrants moved elsewhere, while maintaining the kind of basic percentage demographics in Southern California that make the likes of Samuel Huntington weep for old glory. Light focuses on the effects of negative measures in L.A., but it is just as likely that the emergent comparative economic advantages of other new regions provided a new demand: there were indeed fresh fields in Georgia or up-state New York, and the globalisation that accounted for L.A.'s initial demand as a global city during restructuring, has now penetrated industries in backwaters elsewhere. For sure, how this information was passed back down the networks is less clear. Light's conception of globalisation is also narrow in only looking at its effect on the U.S. economy. Mexicans in new destinations are also more diversified by class, and what drives them is often restructuring at the source, not always what goes on at the destination (in the U.S.). And, though Light quotes research that suggests otherwise, L.A. Mexicans who have made it to be socially mobile, are also part of a benign general housing drift of Whites, Asians and African-Americans eastwards, as they move out of an expensive Southern California to cheaper cities such as Las Vegas or Phoenix.

So is L.A. particularly hostile? Light is certainly right that for all the focus on national policies, it is the local where we should look for implementation. There is anecdotal evidence that the routine harassment by police of Latinos is getting markedly worse. But he does not distinguish between the much more liberal and tolerant core city of L.A. itself – a distinct part of the 15 million plus five country sprawl, which recently became the most diverse city in the world on some measures – and the often sharply conservative suburban masses that surround it. For every municipality using police to implement basic

immigration control, there are others with a growing Latino political caucus or police forces that rely on good community relations and pragmatic law enforcement. Southern Californians, meanwhile, continue to (illegally) employ undocumented Latino workers as a routine part of their everyday lives; now it's just that everyone in the U.S. does this.

Light's deductive style deliberately offers plenty of such points for argument, a mark of its theoretical clarity. It is an analysis built on aggregate numbers, not messy grounded details, and thus not for readers who like to like their sociology to show a human face. But as an exercise in logical migration theory building, it stands as one of the most trenchant contributions to this desperately atheoretical field since Michael Piore's classic *Birds of Passage*.

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