

BOOK REVIEWS

So Far from Allah, So Close to Mexico: Middle Eastern Immigrants in Modern Mexico by *Theresa Alfaro-Velcamp*
(2007) *University of Texas Press, Austin, TX, USA, 272 pp.*

Contemporary Mexico is, for most, the home to the majority of migrants (and mostly undocumented migrants) living in the US. Those migrants are often portrayed as young, poor Mestizo (Spanish speaking, non-indigenous) men seeking wage work and sharing an unproblematic history of movement that is rooted in the bracero program and Mexico's economic crisis of the 1980s and 1990s. But this image of Mexico and the Mexican migrant fails to capture the vibrant complexity of contemporary Mexican society and the multifaceted history of Mexican migration. In fact, throughout its history, Mexico has not only produced migrants, but the nation has also attracted immigrants and not only those from the Iberian Peninsula. Thus, filling an important gap in our understanding of Mexican migration and identity is Theresa Alfaro-Velcamp's new history of Middle Eastern migration to Mexico, "So Far from Allah, So Close to Mexico" published in 2007 by the University of Texas Press.

Alfaro-Velcamp's motivation is personal, to understand her own family's movement from Lebanon to Mexico and finally to the US. Nevertheless, the results are far from one family's story. The author uses resources from Mexico and the US, from governmental programs, private libraries, universities in Mexico and the US as well as all important family stories, and creates a highly readable narrative that explores the rapid growth of Mexico's Middle Eastern community; from the turcos who arrived during the Porfiriato (1880-1910) through the Mexican Revolution, Mexico's growth and development as a nation (post revolution through the 1970s) to the economic crisis of the 1980s and the contemporary period. More than a story of immigration and settlement, the author also investigates how Middle Eastern immigrants become Mexican.

Chapters one and two set the stage for the book. In chapter one, the author explores the complicated meaning of Mexicanidad for Middle Eastern immigrants. She shows how Middle Eastern immigrants adopt, integrate and redefine what it means to be Mexican. Alfaro-Velcamp also points out that it is critical to understand the region of origin of the immigrant (whether Lebanon

BOOK REVIEW: "SO FAR FROM ALLAH"

or Syria for example) the economic status of the mover (is the immigrant an elite or member of the working class) and destination and regionalism in Mexico itself that often colors outcomes. Chapter two is a broader introduction to the movement of Middle Eastern immigrants to Mexico as well as the meaning of their movements in the contemporary discussion of transnational space. Critical in this chapter is the discussion of health and Mexican as well as US regulations on tuberculosis and trachoma. Many Middle Eastern immigrants who viewed Mexico as a stepping stone to entrance into the US found that due to US health codes (not to mention Mexican sanitary codes) entry was impossible.

The next six chapters (3-6) explore specific periods of movement and begin with the arrival of turcos (any Middle Easterner) during the Porfiriato (1880-1910). Alfaro-Velcamp notes that Middle Eastern migrants were largely welcomed by Mexico and the Mexican government and did not encounter the prejudices that often greeted Chinese and other foreigners. This may be in part because the majority of these immigrants were, or at least stated they were, Catholic. Nevertheless, the question of why and how Middle Eastern immigrants integrated into Mexico (ethnically and in terms of their religions) is a critical theme throughout the book. In this chapter on early sojourners the author focuses largely on the Middle Eastern community in the states of Coahuila and Durango throughout this book (a city she calls La Laguna), she also notes the importance of other points of destination (Ciudad Juárez and Nuevo Laredo in the north and Progreso in the south). Of real interest is her discussion of the ways in which turcos moved into business, settled throughout the country and integrated through marriage.

These themes are repeated and our understanding of Middle Eastern immigration grows as the author moves through the Mexican Revolution (chapter 4), post-revolutionary Mexico (chapter 5) and contemporary history (chapter 6). Alfaro-Velcamp notes that discrimination against Middle Eastern immigrants rose during Mexico's post-revolutionary history. In parallel, there was an interesting increase in what, for lack of a better term, is putative nativism. Middle Eastern immigrants identified with Middle Eastern countries in ways that had not occurred in the past. Alfaro-Velcamp points out that in the 1930s and beyond most immigrants (whether it was true or not) described themselves as Syrian or Lebanese born Catholics (and this practice was likely linked to the Maronite traditions of Lebanon and a pro-European identity). This

accomplished several goals, not the least of which was allowing non-Catholics freer movement as they integrated into Mexican society and as the author points out a way at the same time to distance themselves from Mexico's working class. The success of Middle Eastern immigrants to Mexico is clear in the accomplishments and achievements of the children and grandchildren of early immigrants in business and politics within Mexico (see chapter 6). Alfaro-Velcamp notes the history of these successes, including roles in government (such as the governor of several states) and business (such as Carlos Slim Helú) but also the difficulties that Middle Easterners and their children (and grandchildren) encountered as they integrate to Mexico.

Building a Mexican identity was not and is not easy for the descendants of Mexico's Middle Eastern immigrants. And the author ends this interesting study by making the point that scholars too often ignore the diversity (both ethnic and cultural) that is at the heart of Mexico. It is not simply a Mestizo state mixing Spanish and indigenous traditions, rather as Alfaro-Velcamp shows, Mexico can only be understood as multiethnic. The author's point isn't to use this diversity as an excuse; rather, her goal is to ask us as readers to rethink just what it means to be Mexican in the contemporary world. Having asked that question, she moves on to several others that suggest we must challenge the very integration of Mexico and the US and rethink what immigration means in the contemporary world and for those who come across the US border.

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Global regionalisation, Core Peripheral Trends by *Hermanus S. Geyer (eds.)*, (2006) *Edward Elgar Publishing, Cheltenham*, 193 pp.

The book has a strong economic-demographic focus on the recent developments in the global core and periphery regions. It has been contributed by 22 experts mainly in the fields of economics, urban planning, migration and geography presented in three sections. First section explains and discusses the trends in globalisation. In the second part, the global core regions are examined. Thirdly, the global periphery is discussed. The authors have quite a task to fulfil the numerous objectives set for the book. In general these