

Jacob P. Chamberlain, *Migrant Justice in the Age of Removal: Rights, Law, and Resistance against Territory's Exclusions*, Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2025. ISBN: 9780820369914 (paper); ISBN: 9780820369907 (cloth); ISBN: 9780820369938 (ebook)

In his book *Migrant Justice*, author Jacob Chamberlain maps out the political geographies of Vermont-based farmworker organization Migrant Justice during the first Trump administration. What drew me to read Chamberlain's work was our shared circle of concerns, ones he documents in detail and with rigor in this book: migrant justice movements, labor, mobility, resistance, and immigration enforcement as social control. The story of Migrant Justice is compelling: through regional assemblies of undocumented farmworkers, the organization built political power to take on the entangled issues of unlivable living and work conditions for dairy workers, racial profiling and mobility restriction of Latinos, and the immigration policing apparatus. Amidst a series of Migrant Justice campaign wins, ICE surveilled the organization and targeted its members with deportation proceedings. The organization fought back and these proceedings (in Vermont, at least) were largely closed.

Struggles to improve work conditions, restrict immigration enforcement, advance the freedom to move, and address racism are crucial, practical, and too rarely understood together. However, with this book, Chamberlain draws on his full year of ethnographic fieldwork with Migrant Justice to chronicle and theorize how the organization has done just that.

The interlocking issues of mobility restriction, labor subordination, and racism combine and compound with one another in what the author calls the "Age of Removal". For Chamberlain, "removal" refers to those techniques for physically, politically, and socially excising non-citizens from a territory. Chamberlain specifies "removal" as:

the complicated landscape of interrelated contexts, meanings, and enactments of removing that we find in the purview of US border and immigration policy. These include but are not limited to, removal across borders through deportation, removal from social life into detention, removal from public life of the polis through fearmongering,

and the order of removal that has become a crucial legal mechanism in US immigration enforcement. (p.5)

In the first full chapter of the book, Chamberlain rehearses the developments in immigration law and enforcement—the apparatus of “removal”—in the United States over the past 45 years. The US’s massive detention and deportation apparatus did not spring up overnight, and it is not the invention of any particular or particularly authoritarian chief executive. The author’s outline of the history is faithful and familiar, one that many social scientists and historians of immigration in the United States have recited. Chamberlain puts his own stamp on it by marking 1996 as the beginning of the Age of Removal: it was in 1996 when in the US deportations were redefined through a new legal term, *removal*, and the “order of removal” was codified in law, along with bars on re-entry for those who are removed. Others might place the shift to removal at the detention and exclusion of Cuban and Haitian asylum seekers in the 1970s and 1980s, the 1986 innovation of the Criminal Alien Program, the 1994 Operation Gatekeeper, or the 2003 creation of the US Department of Homeland Security and the Bureau of Immigration and Customs Enforcement (now ICE). And of course, other historians and scholars will note that “removal” has its genealogy in the linked history of the US’s Western Expansion and Indigenous removals (see Hernández 2017; Kanstroom 2007). Chamberlain draws his bright line at 1996; the line is useful for the central concern of his book, which is to interpret the various facets of Migrant Justice’s form of activism as a contestation of the Age of Removal.

This chapter is followed by three sections that detail what Chamberlain sees as the three main organizing thrusts of Migrant Justice. The first is the Milk with Dignity campaign through which farmworkers and allies mobilized consumers to pressure big distributors to commit to buying from dairies that meet certain standards for workplace conditions and worker protections. With this campaign, Migrant Justice organized to apply collective pressure across the dairy network, from worker to consumer to distributor to producer, utilizing a discourse of human rights and dignity to mobilize power and support. The next section describes the effort to establish statewide driver’s licenses and local sanctuary laws to protect dairy workers from racial profiling in police and immigration enforcement targeting. With these legal reform campaigns,

farmworkers worked with allied civil liberties organizations and lawmakers to defend their rights to the freedom to move and freedom from discrimination. In the final section, Chamberlain charts the progress of a First Amendment (freedom of speech) lawsuit against ICE, who had targeted Migrant Justice organizers with detention and deportation proceedings on the basis of their organizing. He argues that in doing so, they expanded the legal understanding of the application of the right to free speech. Within each of these three sections, Chamberlain first details the forms of removal that farmworkers faced. He then outlines how the organization mobilized farmworkers, worked through solidarity networks, and demanded reforms that would challenge marginalization and removal.

In each of these three sections, Chamberlain theorizes that Migrant Justice leverages a very specific strategy: the organization mobilizes what the author calls “counter-hegemonic human rights” discourses to redistribute power and challenge the various facets of their marginalization and removal. For instance, through its Milk with Dignity campaign, Migrant Justice leveraged a discourse of human rights and human dignity to successfully pressure a major distributor, the Vermont-based ice cream company Ben & Jerry’s, to require better labor and living standards for dairy workers on the farms that supply them. Chamberlain asserts that this discourse is counter-hegemonic in the way that it counters existing norms by putting “multiscalar networks of oppression on display”, problematizing them, and then providing “solutions that counter them” (p.107). And in particular, he sees Migrant Justice’s human rights demands as counter-hegemonic because they assert the rights of undocumented non-citizens: “This is a cross-border act—one that transcends territory’s limitations on rights” (p.107). That is, the organization, and the undocumented activists involved, not only engage in political struggle over oppressive working conditions, but in doing so enact a political subjectivity that neither the territorial state nor their workplaces ascribed to them. They thus challenge the dominant way that the state has imposed certain relationships of belonging and non-belonging, and certain distributions of rights and power among the people residing in a given territory.

Indeed, Chamberlain characterizes Migrant Justice’s strategy as “acts of deterritorialization of rights”. Through this argument, Chamberlain makes his entry into the long debate about how to theorize the powerful political subjectivities and projects of those who do

not have formal membership. Many political geographers, as well as those in adjacent fields of political science and political sociology, have addressed this problem space through a consideration of (non)citizenship. Chamberlain instead centers the concept of “territory”, which I thought novel. In doing so, he draws on Stuart Elden’s work on territory. For Elden (2013), territory is not simply a bounded envelope of land, but rather a technology for control of both a terrain and a people, as well as the relationship between the two. For Chamberlain, what is important here is removal as a technique of territory. The various facets of physical, political, and social removal operate to define Vermont (and the US) as a territory where certain people belong and others do not, or at least not on equal and full terms; Migrant Justice reworks that relationship through the various facets of its organizing.

One of Stuart Elden’s own omissions was a consideration of the genealogical relationship between the technology of territory and either the technology of racial hierarchy or the political project of colonialism (Kearns 2017). Chamberlain analyzes what he identifies as the “racial component of territory” most explicitly in his chapters on Migrant Justice’s legal reform strategies for challenging law enforcement’s racial profiling. In Vermont—and other places in the US—law enforcement has routinely stopped cars that they suspect to contain undocumented drivers or passengers, and then in one way or another turn them over to immigration enforcement (ACLU Michigan 2021; Armenta 2017; Coleman and Kocher 2019; Madrigal 2017). This police-immigration enforcement nexus operates through racial profiling to functionally restrict farmworkers’ ability to move through public space and do things like shop for groceries, take kids to school, and organize for improved working conditions. As Chamberlain explains, “Vermont manifests carceral or prison-like space and place for migrant workers due to their appearance” (p.138). But of course, it is not that the police pull people over because of their appearance; they pull people over because of their own understandings of race and territory. This kind of racial profiling is what Chamberlain references by the “racial component of territory”, but here I would submit that territory does not have a separate racial component that we can conceptually excise from the rest. Intrinsic to territory is the notion of controlling variously hierarchized humans’ relationships to a terrain, and this is a fundamentally racial project—what Ruth Wilson Gilmore (2002: 16) called the “death-dealing displacement of difference into

hierarchies that organize relations within and between the planet's sovereign political territories". I bring us to the word "hierarchies" and to the notion of human hierarchy deliberately, because I suspect that what is counter-hegemonic in human rights claims comes into play just here, in the contestation of the links between racialization, human hierarchy and especially dehumanization—and thus who can be exposed to social, political, or physical premature death (Cacho 2012; Gilmore 2007) associated with removal.

According to Chamberlain, the legal reforms that Migrant Justice spearheaded to claim the freedom to move within Vermont included prompting the state to make driver's licenses available to undocumented residents and strengthening sanctuary policies to prevent police from turning over traffic stops to immigration authorities. These are important steps for increasing autonomy, ending isolation, and facilitating organizing among farmworkers. Chamberlain interprets Migrant Justice's involvement in the contentious political struggle over these legal reforms as a de-territorializing move: here you have a group of people formally excluded from the political process who are able to shape that political process, to write policy, and to enact a form of political belonging not ascribed them. In doing so they rewrite the relationship between people and territory.

What Chamberlain does not highlight is a simultaneous move that re-territorializes: sanctuary policies redraw the line between those who belong and those who don't belong, but they don't alter the fact that there is a line. Someone remains outside the circle of protection, exposed to dehumanization. And that is important because several years later, the Trump administration 2.0 has found a way to expand its enforcement capacities quite broadly, in the name of finding and deporting "criminal aliens" and the "worst of the worst". These are precisely the categories of human that sanctuary policies like the ones Chamberlain chronicles in Vermont writes out of the circle of protection (for critiques of sanctuary along these lines, see Paik 2020; Roy 2019; Roy and Zablotsky 2025). Deterritorialization is often accompanied by reterritorialization. However, to acknowledge this would complicate the tight narrative that Chamberlain has drawn around his subject, its activities, or their counter-hegemonic content and form.

Be that as it may, I am for this book. Relationships between immigration restriction, mobility or freedom to move, and workers' bargaining power are important for us to understand in relation to one another in our current conjuncture. The unfolding contradictions between immigration restriction and the need for devalued workers in places like Vermont will continue to lead to new alliances, opportunities, resolutions, and challenges. Chamberlain makes an admirable contribution here. Also crucial is Chamberlain's effort to grapple with the political subjectivity and political repression of undocumented organizers—an important issue as places like the United States transition into a more explicitly authoritarian conjuncture. It is now more apparent than ever that we can all glean important lessons and sustenance from those who do not officially belong or have rights, but nevertheless find ways, through solidarity, to build collective power and improve conditions of work and life.

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