

## The Undiscovered Country

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*Tobacco Blues* is a video documentary that focuses directly on the impacts of global restructuring within the tobacco industry, and federal agricultural policy, on four Kentucky burley-farming families; in doing so it effectively weaves place, space, politics, economics and culture as each family struggles to adjust to the declining fortunes and moral turbulence wrought in the wake of this particular crop. In this brief commentary I make note of the challenges and concerns facing tobacco farmers, but also use the film to illustrate three issues that should be of significance to rural geographers. These are: (1) the inextricable linkage of productive and reproductive factors within rural spaces; (2) the importance of theorizing the "global" and the "local"; and (3) the need to reassess our methods of research and presentation.

With more tobacco being produced overseas farmers across America are finding their livelihoods threatened. *Tobacco Blues* examines this transformation by considering the tradition of tobacco farming in one community, eastern Kentucky, the moral debates on cigarettes currently in circulation, and the viable options farmers have to tobacco production. The central, organizing theme of the film is that tobacco farming is a way of life as well as gaining an income, and as it comes to an end whole cultures are being transformed. Will tobacco farms become mere artifacts in the landscape?

The four families depicted in *Tobacco Blues* are chosen for their diverse experiences of the business. The Mack family narrates the challenges facing them as both tobacco farmers and African-Americans in Kentucky. Mattie Mack is a well-known activist for the protection of tobacco, and is visible at the national level through her meetings with President Clinton on the subject. Carrying on the fifth generation of tobacco farming,

the Greathouse family is determined to maintain this heritage, even though their modern farm primarily produces other crops. Ed and Janet Jenkins raised nine children in the hope that they would carry on with the family farm: only two of the children remain, however, while their mother worries that Ed has emphysema. Finally, Steve Smith has decided to remain on his family's tobacco farm and supplant his income with organic vegetables, even though his parents urge him to find a more secure future elsewhere.

Moral issues involved with the cultivation of tobacco weigh heavily on each family. All discourage smoking in their homes, while the tobacco companies are castigated for the addictive carcinogens that are added to cigarettes. Farmers feel victimized by the corporate side of the industry when images like the Marlboro Man and Joe Camel glamorize smoking on the one hand, and obscure the culture of tobacco on the other. The over-riding opinion, however, expressed by all four families is that smoking is fundamentally a consumer choice, and that in supplying the basic ingredient for cigarettes they have earned enough money to realize their own dreams in terms of educating their children.

One weakness of the film is the lack of information on the production of tobacco: more background on FDA regulations and environmental policy would help viewers unfamiliar with current debates appreciate the magnitude of the crisis affecting farmers and the diversity of processes and policies that must be negotiated for farming to take place. That said, the contribution of *Tobacco Blues* lies within the subtle yet effective way in which the cultural geography of the rural South is documented. In rural geography the productive processes involved in 'making a living' have all too often been privileged over the reproductive

processes involved in education, health and raising a family. In *Tobacco Blues* we see the necessary interconnectedness of all of these factors, such that the demarcations of “economic” and “cultural” geography are rendered arbitrary. Further, the globalized networks that link farmers in Kentucky to the halls of Washington DC, corporate headquarters in New York, financial dealers on Wall Street, farmers in the Third World, and cigarette smokers across the world, undermine any attempt at a “place-based” study of tobacco. Our theories concerning the transformation of tobacco production must be able to account for this cross-scale complex of people and events that together make up the tobacco “industry.” Finally, as geographers we must expand our methods

of inquiry and learn the importance of oral history and narrative. Too often we fall back on statistics in order to get the “big” picture – what such a picture lacks, however, is a sense not only of the complexity of processes noted above, but also their real world relevance. In my own work with Muslim communities in the rural South I have come to realize that it is only via in-depth interviewing that one can discern and describe the spaces that people live in, spaces which have traditionally been invisible to rural geographers. If geographers are to propel themselves to the forefront of research into rural areas, they must follow the lead of people such as the film-makers and learn from them how to see the “undiscovered” country.