

INTRODUCTION

Curing the Future: Issues & Strategies in Remaking Tobacco-Dependent Communities

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The past two decades have witnessed a proliferation of new research on rural areas in industrialized countries. Since the farm crisis of the mid-1980s, and the restructuring of agri-food industries throughout the 1990s, such studies have concerned themselves with questions ranging from the impacts of globalization and rural restructuring on rural communities to postmodern constructions of the countryside. Numerous new lines of inquiry within rural development studies in general and agrarian political economy in particular have taken root, and the contributions of geographers to this emerging body of research have been significant.

According to Buttel (2001), research in agrarian political economy has taken a new direction over the past decade characterized by four key foci of theory and research: 1) world-historical and world-systemic analyses of agri-food systems (e.g., Friedmann & McMichael 1989; McMichael 1994); 2) global agri-food commodity chains/systems analysis (Bonanno, et al. 1994); 3) agri-food political-sociological neo-regulationist studies (Marsden et al. 2000; Bonanno & Constance 1996); and 4) actor-network analyses of agri-food systems (Goodman & Watts 1997; Busch & Juska 1997; Marsden & Arce 1995; Murdoch & Marsden 1995). One particularly significant aspect of these foci is the consideration of production-consumption relations and the way in which the politics of consumption "influence development in rural and urban spaces" (Marsden 1996:248).

In addition to these themes emanating from studies of agrarian political economy, other emerging trends reflect "the cultural turn" taken in the social sciences during the late 1980s and 1990s (e.g., Cloke 1997; Cloke et al. 1994). Many of these approaches incorporate social relations and social action into analytical frameworks and concern themselves with the social construction of institutions and power (see Marsden 1996). The Wageningen School (van der Ploeg 1991; de Haan 1997), for example, which draws on actor-oriented perspectives to highlight farmer agency in responding to macro-level transformations, is one such influential trend. Another is the introduction of discourse-analytical methods to studies of food systems politics by scholars such as Koc (1994) and Whatmore (2001). These approaches "explore the social and cultural construction of rural space and ... focus upon the institutional and actor-oriented mechanisms ... in shaping it both physically and socially" (Marsden 1996:246). In doing so, these studies reveal the ways in which processes of economic restructuring and globalization are social constructs, "which are dynamic, uneven and *contested*" (Jarosz 1996:45, emphasis mine). And, they highlight the centrality of factors such as social divisions of labor, relations of identity and work experience, and race, ethnicity, gender, and class to understanding the global food system and processes of uneven development.

Key questions, then, emerging from this

diverse body of literature include:

- how agrarian structures and state agricultural policies have developed over time;
- the nature of economic transformations at varying scales of analysis;
- the extent to which agricultural restructuring parallels trends in industry;
- the diverse interplay between global processes of agro-restructuring and local-level experiences of rural change;
- the spatial implications of agrarian change, including how global processes are embedded within localities and how this reconfigures space and place;
- how commodity chains and production systems come to be constructed and coordinated across national political boundaries;
- the role of transnational corporations, capital, and commodity flows in shaping production, movement, and consumption of foodstuffs and other agricultural products;
- implications of agro-economic trends for food security, access, and self-sufficiency;
- the ways in which trends toward organic foods and local food systems challenge tendencies toward standardization and homogenization and restructure regulatory practices;
- the role of racial, gender, and class divisions of labor in shaping local experiences of agricultural restructuring;
- the role of democracy, citizenship and empowerment in development processes.

These investigations have taught us about the complexity of global agro-economic processes, diversity of local outcomes and experiences, and the multiple dimensions of uneven development. They have also challenged the traditional conceptual dualism of agriculture/industry and north/south food dependency models within agricultural systems (see Jarosz 1996), and in doing so, have redefined our

understanding of rural development.

In light of the widespread changes that have impacted rural communities in industrialized regions, rural development professionals face a number of challenges as they attempt to assist rural communities adjust to the macro-level forces impacting daily lives. As Duncan (1999), Flora et al. (1992), and Walzer (1990) note, many rural areas have experienced sustained economic decline since the 1950s, and the persistence of poverty in rural areas endures as a problem for rural development practitioners (see Duncan 1999). Factors driving this deterioration in rural livelihoods include the decline of rural resource-based industries and industrial restructuring within the manufacturing sector (Mazie & Killian 1991). Rural out-migration, population decline, and the aging of rural communities pose additional challenges to the task of rural community revitalization and service-delivery, as growth in the latter favors urban areas. At the same time, other rural areas struggle to manage rapid growth in a manner that ensures that benefits accrue to local residents (Flora et. al 1992).

For some time now it has been clear that traditional ways of generating capital for rural communities are no longer adequate, and rural communities need “to broaden their economic base as protection against the increased uncertainties created by the changing global economy” (Flora et. al 1992:151). This has required government officials and rural community leaders to think in unconventional ways and adopt new ideas and strategies—indeed forge new paradigms—to cope with the widespread changes impacting rural regions.

In North Carolina, of course, the burning issue of the past decade or so has been how to adjust to global restructuring of the tobacco industry in the wake of declining world consumption and cutbacks in production. With no clear crop alternative to tobacco, and with declining employment in traditional industries, farmers and rural residents in the state struggle to maintain their livelihoods, and indeed their

very existence. What options lie before North Carolina's rural communities as traditional sources of income erode? What types of action are required of rural residents if their communities are to survive and thrive? It is to these questions that this special issue of the *North Carolina Geographer* is addressed. The papers contained in this special issue are edited transcriptions of presentations at a conference entitled, "Curing the Future: Issues and Strategies in Remaking North Carolina's Tobacco-Dependent Communities" that Department of Geography at East Carolina University hosted February 28-March 1, 2002.

The conference was organized under the auspices of the ECU Geography Department Rural Development initiative, which seeks to facilitate meaningful dialogue and the exchange of information among the wide range of rural development actors and stakeholders in the region. Our intent was to bring together farmers, farm workers, community members, development practitioners and decision makers, government officials, and scholars to exchange information, to coordinate existing rural development strategies, and to develop new ideas for the future. Conference sessions addressed four thematic areas: 1) Globalization, the World Tobacco Economy and Rural Communities; 2) Alternative Crops, Emerging Technologies and Farm Income Diversification; 3) Producer Alliances and Farmer-owned Value-added Business; and 4) Strategies for Community Development in Tobacco-Dependent Regions. Presenters in each session came from diverse professional backgrounds including academia, county extension, farming, non-profit organizations, and government.

In Session 1, papers by Dan Stevens and Blake Brown discuss the current state of the world tobacco economy, with particular reference to flue-cured tobacco, and North Carolina's place in that economy. One of the pressing issues facing US tobacco growers in general and North Carolina growers in particular is increased competition from foreign producers.

The US is no longer a dominant force in the world tobacco economy, and the loss of market shares to other countries presents a number of challenges to the US and North Carolina tobacco industry. Chris Beacham reviews trends in North Carolina's tobacco economy and the economic challenges that derive from tobacco dependency. He notes that tobacco dependency takes different forms in different communities, and emphasizes that an understanding of these differences must inform the particular strategies communities adopt for economic development. Katie Algeo next presents research in two burley-producing counties in Kentucky and western North Carolina that focuses on changes in the burley tobacco belt and the long-term consequences of shifting from an auction system to contract sales. Betty Bailey rounds out the session with a presentation of preliminary results from the 2001 Tobacco Farmer Survey conducted by the Rural Advancement Fund International-USA (RAFI) and profiles of several pilot projects undertaken by RAFI through its Tobacco Communities Reinvestment Fund.

Session 2 is devoted to the theme of alternative crops, emerging technologies and farm income diversification. Ed Estes first discusses trends in alternative cropping patterns and current research initiatives. M. Ray McKinnie follows with a discussion of farm income diversification that focuses particularly on opportunities in small livestock alternatives and small farms as economically viable livestock production units. The next paper, by Charles Talbott, discusses a project underway that attempts to re-vitalize the small-scale hog industry in North Carolina. Talbott emphasizes the importance of small farmers to food security and the risk of food crises that are associated with the loss of small farmers. Bert Nimmo, a farmer from Greene County, then describes the current status of kenaf production in Eastern North Carolina. Kenaf is a fiber crop that holds tremendous potential for growers as an alternative to tobacco in this region. Finally, Tony Kleese

presents opportunities that exist in organic farming and argues for the need to create sustainable farming ventures. One of the key themes that emerge in all of the papers in this session is the need for farmers to increasingly involve themselves in the marketing of their products and to envision themselves as much more than mere producers of commodities.

The papers of Session 3 and the keynote address by Dennis Mullen (CEO, Agrilink Foods) develop this theme further by focusing on organizational models for commodity producers and the development of farmer-owned value-added businesses. Christopher Merrett discusses cooperative approaches to local economic development currently underway in the Midwest to combat political and economic forces undermining rural communities—i.e., corporate consolidation and farm consolidation. Through the organization of “New Generation Cooperatives” the effort is to develop value-added agriculture in which commodities are processed locally, thereby allowing rural communities to profit more directly from local agri-industries. Bobby Ham then discusses the efforts on his farm to reduce dependence on tobacco through contract vegetable production. The third paper is by Billy Dunham, who presents the findings of a feasibility study that explored ways to improve returns to the production of agriculture in the communities of the Global TransPark (GTP) area. This study focused on produce and aquaculture and the feasibility of locating a cold storage facility in the GTP area. Paul Skillicorn concludes the session by exploring the potential of corporations (versus co-operatives) as a model for producer alliances. The keynote address by Dennis Mullen delineates a strategic vision for producer alliances via the example of Agrilink Foods and discusses the necessary steps producers and producer groups need to take to compete in today’s agro-food markets. He particularly emphasizes the need to “break paradigms” in order to effectively forge new business strategies in the wake of changing consumer trends.

The final session of the conference was devoted to more general strategies for rural community development in tobacco-dependent regions. The keynote address by Billy Ray Hall provides an overview of rural economies in North Carolina and the resources that are available to rural communities in the state. Ferrel Guillory then discusses the political and social changes that have taken place in North Carolina and how these impact rural areas in the state. Of importance is the trend toward urbanization and how this concentrates electoral power in a small collection of rapidly growing, Piedmont metropolitan area counties. The final two papers provide specific examples of project initiatives undertaken by non-governmental organizations. Pate Cabe presents some of the projects HandMade in America has initiated to foster economic and community development in western North Carolina. One of the key components of HandMade’s approach is to identify and build on local assets, and many of their projects have involved promoting local crafts and agri-tourism. Finally, Paul Castelloe’s paper instructs us in participatory approaches to community development and describes how the Center for Participatory Change, located in Asheville, NC, has used participatory development to help farmers remake tobacco-dependent communities in the western part of the state. The message that both Castelloe and Cabe bring to bear is that local communities are anxious to explore new approaches for community revitalization, and they have the wisdom, energy and power to remake themselves.

My colleagues in the Department of Geography who helped organize this event (Drs. Derek Alderman, Jeffrey Popke, and Rebecca Torres) and I benefited tremendously from the input, support, and assistance of our planning committee. These individuals include: Chris Beachum (NC Rural Center), Allen Briggs (Save Our State), Dick Brockett (Regional Development Institute, ECU), Bill Hobbs (Rural Development – USDA), Scott Marlow (RAFI- USA),

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