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***Working Poor: Farmworkers in the United States.* By David Griffith and Ed Kissam with Jeronimo Camposeco, Anna Garcia, Max Pfeffer, David Runsten, and Manuel Valdes Pizzini. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1995. xiv, 332 pp. 13 plates.**

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In their book on migrant farm labor, Griffith and Kissam make the ambitious claim that they are going to provide a comprehensive analysis of immigrant farm labor in the United States. Their aim is to compare different sending and receiving communities, "balanc[ing] the detail of local studies with the representativeness of national studies" (p. 22). They do an excellent job of delivering on this claim, and successfully link national-level data and political economic forces with local-level experience and struggle. In addition, their analysis is richly historically contextualized so that we see the transformation of the migrant farmworker experience not as some linear, mechanistic process, but as one that is complex and contingent. Changes in federal and state agricultural policies and laws, changes in immigration laws, changes in technology, climatic disasters (e.g., freezes, droughts), changes in consumer preferences, and the organization of production of various crops shape the receiving area's opportunity structure for migrant workers. Conversely, conditions in sending areas also deeply influence the characteristics of the migrant labor force. Griffith and Kissam do an excellent job of illustrating how global and local conditions historically intersect and shape farming in the United States, farm labor demographics, and farmworkers' experiences, which are increasingly transnational.

Most impressive is their collection and synthesis of local, regional, and national-level data on migrant farmworkers. As many have noted, acquiring this type of data is complicated by the fact that migrants often form a "hidden" community. Students of migrant farm labor will find much useful and detailed data in these pages. Griffith and Kissam's choice of field sites also enhances the utility of their data. Most sites (Immokalee, Florida; Delmarva Peninsula, Maryland and Delaware; Southwestern Michigan; Mayaguez, Puerto Rico; Weslaco, Texas; rural New Jersey; Parlier, California) have been the focus of previous research. Consequently, not only do they provide us with a useful comparative database, but a historical one as well.

The book begins with an excellent discussion of the history of farming and

farm labor in the United States. The authors set out to challenge many of our comfortable myths about farm labor, including the notion of three migrant streams (East Coast, Midwestern, and West Coast). They note that the complex combination of domestic agricultural policy and legislation, changes in farming technology and techniques, climatic events (floods, droughts, freezes), changing consumer preferences, and changes in the organization of production for a given crop, as well as political upheavals in Mesoamerica and the Caribbean, together shape and change demands for farm labor and the farm labor population. Chapter 1 examines this complex pattern of interaction in broad historical outline whereas "community studies" in chapters 2 through 8 flesh out this discussion. The six cases represent a wide range of communities differentially located in the U.S. agricultural economy: old and new sending communities, receiving communities, and communities characterized by both activities. Each case examines the nature of commercial agriculture and labor force requirements, the relative importance of farm labor contractors, the ethnic dimension of the farm labor market, and housing and households. In some instances, this is supplemented with material specific to a given case.

Having just relocated from southeastern Michigan to South Texas, I found Griffith and Kissam's analyses of Weslaco, Texas, and southwestern Michigan (two historically linked sending and receiving areas) of particular interest. What is striking about the Weslaco farmworker population is how it has changed over the past 40 to 50 years. In the 1950s and 1960s this was an area that originally received post-Bracero migrant farmworkers from Mexico drawn to the area by inexpensive housing and plentiful local farmwork. These individuals, legalized under new immigration laws, worked locally but also entered migrant streams moving out of Texas. Weslaco reached its peak as a sending community in the mid- to late-1960s, followed by a slow decline that accelerated in the 1980s.

What has contributed to this decline? First, the height of the Texas farmworker diaspora (1950-1975) in some ways sowed the seeds of its own collapse as a sending population. Many migrants successfully settled in farming areas outside of Texas, establishing local farm labor pools throughout the United States. Second, mechanization has reduced the demand for farm labor locally and nationally. Third, periodic freezes and droughts have led to severe bottlenecks in labor demand that have effectively pushed people out of farmwork into other activities. In addition, these climatic disasters have led to a concentration of capital in the hands of fewer owners, many of whom are finding "offshore" production in more temperate climates a seductive option. Fourth, an overall trend in South Texas agriculture has shifted crop production (especially of nonmechanized crops) to Mexico, thus reducing job availability in Weslaco. This shift was stimulated by the devaluation of the peso during the 1980s, making production in Mexico especially attractive. Also, the Mexican economic crisis of 1982, followed by years of painful restructuring, and yet another crisis in 1994 and 1995, devastated a border economy dependent on trade with Mexican customers. Further exacerbating matters, the Texas economy as a whole slumped in the 1980s with the loss of oil revenues. In an ironic twist, even under these severe economic conditions only 45 percent of the

population of Weslaco remains in farmwork. Younger South Texas farmworkers seem far less attached to farm work as their main source of income. (This despite the fact that 93 percent of all farmworkers in Weslaco had parents who were farmworkers, underscoring how this segment of the labor market has reproduced itself.) Many had combined farmwork with other forms of employment, leading to an employment history that was characteristically unstable and unsuccessful. Total unemployment in the region had risen from 12 percent in 1980 to 20 percent in 1986. Food stamp use is three times higher in Weslaco than in Texas as a whole. To finish this grim economic portrait, Hidalgo County (the location of Weslaco) is among the poorest 2 percent of the state in terms of per capita income (p. 91). And although unemployment is high, underemployment is endemic.

Given a depressed economy and labor market, why don't more Weslaco residents seek out farmwork? Griffith and Kissam find a number of interdependent factors at work. First, increasing numbers of Weslacoans are entering into service-sector jobs. Even though these jobs are characterized by underemployment and seasonal layoffs, they represent greater stability than farm work. The authors expand on this by stating, "it is important to recognize that the United States, at the end of the twentieth century, is more culturally diverse than ever before and is witnessing the creation of more and more low-wage jobs and families and communities of the working poor" (p. 97). In other words, Weslaco is an example of a general phenomenon of downward mobility, and the institutionalization of dependency relations within the United States. Second, the collapse of the Mexican economy is sending new waves of Mexican immigrants north. Third, the Weslaco residents who stay in the community are subsidized through various forms of government support (e.g., subsidized housing, public health clinics, and food stamps).

What is left of Weslaco's domestic farmworker force is in direct competition with foreign workers in a shrinking agricultural labor market. As agriculture increasingly mechanizes, harvesting seasons for crops are shortened, sustained employment is less certain, and underemployment becomes increasingly common. Employment as a migrant farm worker is increasingly risky if the worker's goal is to obtain predictable, stable employment--a key to understanding employment decisions among the residents of Weslaco.

We see the effects of the changing location of Weslaco in the local and global economy through its transforming relationship with southwestern Michigan, which has traditionally received South Texas migrant labor since the mid-1960s. Throughout the 1980s, the South Texas migrant connection has eroded, resulting in a reduction of the domestic migrant labor pool available to farm owners. The labor market slack is being taken up by lone, male immigrant workers, primarily from Mexico. For farm owners, there are several advantages to a lone, male immigrant work force: the cost of housing these workers is less, and they are more willing to weather periods of underemployment and unemployment during peak harvest seasons. In Weslaco, underemployment and seasonal unemployment have served to significantly loosen the ties between domestic farmworkers and the immigrant farm labor force. The result is the Mexicanization of the Michigan

farmworker population. Griffith and Kissam state that in general, "[U.S.] citizenship has become a liability...in terms of finding work in agriculture. Their status as citizens affords them powers and rights that impede the 'efficiency' of the agricultural labor process -- an efficiency based on disinformation, unequal power relations between workers and their employers, and a variety of kickbacks and expenses borne by farmworkers for the privilege of working" (p. 247).

South Texas-Michigan cases address the question of whether U.S. agriculture can rely on domestic labor or will rely on fresh infusions of foreign immigrant workers. The answer is that the conditions characterizing farmwork in conjunction with the labor demands of U.S. agriculture have increasingly favored immigrant over domestic workers. Thus, the farm labor force is increasingly segmented according to citizenship and legal status, ethnicity and nationality, and gender. Griffith and Kissam use a "labor reserve" model to explain the segmented farm labor market in which labor moves itself to areas of production, while the costs of reproduction and maintenance of that work force are born elsewhere, whether it is in Mexico, Guatemala, or other areas of Mesoamerica and the Caribbean.

This volume is part of a rich tradition of historically oriented analyses concerning change within and between communities as their location within regional, national, and international economies changes. As such, the research by Griffith and Kissam is in the spirit of studies, such as Julian Steward et al. (1956), that have explored the intersection of local and global history using a political-economic framework. It is also a timely and sober addition to the literature on migrant workers (especially foreign laborers) in the wake of the current anti-immigrant sentiment stimulated by an economic recession and job shortages in many parts of the United States. (see, for example, W. Lutton and J. Tanton 1994, and an excellent critique of their work by E. Mulhare in press).

I do have one minor quibble with the book: It does not provide much in the way of in-depth ethnographic analysis. We occasionally hear the voices of migrant workers telling their story, but we never get to know them as we do, for instance, in the work by Leo Chavez (1992). This was partially off-set by the addition of beautifully reproduced black and white photos juxtaposing migrant workers from the 1930s with their counterparts from the 1980s. Such an ambitious historical and comparative project, of course, cannot do everything. This volume is a welcome resource for scholars interested in U.S. commercial agriculture and labor migration from both a theoretical and policy perspective. Though the book is densely packed with data, its clear prose makes it accessible to advanced undergraduates, as well as graduate students.

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