

The Growth of Low-Wage Labor in the Production of Food

When I was twenty-two years old, I took a job with a construction crew that was building a health club in a rich suburb of Minneapolis. It was a low-paying job with no benefits or opportunity for advancement, earning me enough to rent a twelve dollar a week room owned by a Volkswagen mechanic. Across the hall lived Rudy, an old Latvian with the scar from a Nazi's bullet in his shoulder. He wore sleeveless t-shirts, drank cheap wine, and talked loudly late into the evening, cursing the Russians. Once, on a binge, he threw an end table through my window and then screamed, "Call the police! Call the police! Somebody broke your window!"

The neighborhood supplied Hennepin Avenue's strip joints with Black, Sioux, and Chippewa pimps and whores. Heroin addicts lived in the attic apartment. In the entranceway of the rooming house they begged for spare change and they pilfered food from communal refrigerators. When the mechanic kicked them out they stole a stained glass window, a valued piece of the neighborhood's more affluent past. Into their apartment moved an ex-con who had trouble finding work. For part of his rent he unclogged drains and fixed water damage in the rooming house; for part of his food he hunted cats in the alley with a bow and arrow.

I liked living there. My needs were simple. I had no children, no phone, no charge cards, and I took my meals at a pharmacy around the corner, a block from a school for the blind, where I could get a grilled cheese sandwich served with a pickle and chips for eighty cents. Ketchup was my vegetable. That the blind ate there was a ringing endorsement for someone who earned three dollars an hour driving nails and hauling sheetrock. When

the construction crew finished, I stayed on at the health club as janitor. This was an easy job, easier than construction, because from other, more seasoned employees I learned how to look busy and when and where to hide to sleep or read. Whenever I was caught loafing I had to sit through the manager's speech about six hundred other hungry guys wanting my job, about how if I wasn't careful I'd be out on the street with them. But I didn't believe it. From another janitor I learned just how much you could get away with. This guy was a Vietnam veteran who received a monthly VA stipend because of a leg wound. He planned to work only long enough to qualify for unemployment benefits. He came to work, on average, two out of five days a week and never bothered to explain why he didn't show. While at work he spent most of his time casing the joint—estimating values of things around the club, noting concealed doors, paying attention to schedules. When he was finally fired, after nearly six weeks, the club lost a stack of lumber and a few racks of gym clothes and athletic equipment. This was the kind of guy, I thought, I competed against for that job; this was one of the six hundred hungry guys the manager told me about. Eventually, I quit and collected unemployment myself. I was able to stand that job for as long as I had, though, only because I was young, unmarried, irresponsible, healthy, and had, behind me, a thick cushion of family and friends throughout the American middle class.

But most people I worked with had no such psychological relief. Throughout their whole lives they landed jobs like these—dead-end, low-paying, careerless positions, places in the occupational structure of advanced capitalism known colloquially as “grunt work.” In every advanced capitalist society,¹ somebody has to haul sheetrock, clean toilets, can fruits and vegetables, harvest crops, cut up and package animals and fish to be trucked to supermarkets. Turks sweep Switzerland's streets. Jamaicans pour concrete in London. In central Texas, illegal immigrant Mexicans carry turkey semen from barn to barn to inseminate female birds. Puerto Rican women working in the tuna canning plants of Mayagüez smell so bad that local taxi drivers refuse to carry them in their cars, and North Carolina women working in crab houses throughout the eastern part of the state acquire a rash they simply call “crab rash” for lack of a medical term.

There isn't much romance in jobs like these. They don't pay well. Often they're dirty, they're hard, they stink, they cause injury and illness, and they earn the people who work them no prestige,

teach them no skill, prepare them for no promotion. In many regions of the world these kinds of jobs have become associated with specific ethnic groups, spawning jokes that make fun of a mythical stereotypic stupidity, further enhancing, further reinforcing, these myths. In other contexts, however, the social positions of low-wage labor cannot sustain humor. Palestinians in Israel's occupied territories are revolting against their low-wage-worker, dispossessed status, as are Irish Catholics in Northern Ireland. Among the more notorious low-wage workers grappling their way out of poverty are the black residents of South Africa's Bantustans.

In each of these struggles, phenotypic, cultural, and ethnic phenomena have been used to justify and help maintain economic disparities. In other cases, gender differences are routinely invoked to justify the differential treatment of workers in labor markets and economic processes. Workers' responses to unjust treatment have, as in the above cases, resulted in acts of terror as horrible as the infamous "burning necklace" of the South African youth, which consists of a tire set on fire around the neck of a black who collaborates with the white minority regime. These are, however, only the newsworthy incidents of the ways workers rebel against low-wage-worker status. Far more prevalent among low-wage workers are what Scott, in his *Weapons of the Weak*, refers to as "the ordinary weapons of relatively powerless groups: foot dragging, dissimulation, desertion, false compliance, pilfering, feigned ignorance, slander, arson, sabotage, and so on" (1985: xvi). To Scott's list we add absenteeism or unreliability, which interrupts production schedules and hampers planning, putting a crimp in rationality, as well as the movement out of the formal labor market and into underground and informal economies among those who occupy low-wage, careerless jobs.

Theoretical, Methodological, and Empirical Contributions of the Current Work

To address the complexities of these processes, I draw upon two bodies of literature and apply their insights to low-wage-labor industries: specifically, seafood processing, poultry processing, and, to a lesser extent, United States agriculture. One body of literature deals with labor processes in so-called "advanced" capitalist societies, especially as current theories explain the roles of women, immigrant, and minority workers in these processes.²

The second deals with the uneven incorporation of peasants and tribal peoples into capitalist labor processes. How can works about peasants and tribal peoples be relevant to the lives of workers in an advanced capitalist economy? Part of the answer lies in the nature of advanced capitalism itself. By advanced capitalism we refer to a phase of world capitalist development characterized primarily by the hypermobility of capital and labor. This hypermobility depends upon subtle and complex relations between capital and the state. These relations draw on ideological constructs that help them seem legitimate and justified. Such an advanced phase of capitalism emerges over long time periods. Relationships between capital and the state must be established, which involves negotiation and compromise and, often, conflict and contradiction. The supporting ideologies must be revised in light of these relations, disseminated to the public, revised again, and occasionally codified into law or incorporated into local "wisdom" or folk knowledge. Most important, however, low-wage labor markets need to *constructed*, reorganized, and maintained. Here lies the relevance of the anthropological literature. As discussed in more detail in the following chapter, recent anthropological studies of peasant and tribal communities have focused on the ways these communities have been destabilized and reorganized, or wholly or partially constructed, for the purposes of fueling the expansion of capitalism and its beneficiary states. A crucial component of these reorganization or construction processes has been to establish tenuous yet enduring ties between domestic production³ and wage labor markets. The domestic sector absorbs much of the cost of reproducing the labor supply, maintaining workers during episodic or seasonal periods of unemployment, and providing for workers during illness and old age. In this way the domestic sector relieves capital of paying living wages, taking responsibility for the unemployed, and establishing health insurance programs and pension funds.

Drawing upon the anthropological literature to understand and explain low-wage labor under advanced capitalism is worthwhile in another way as well. The dialogue between our case material and the anthropological literature provides a platform, a base, from which we can critique current theoretical representations of labor that come to us from economics and sociology. For example, neoclassical economic models view labor as yet another commodity. According to this view, workers are free agents, making rational decisions as they sort themselves

among industries, jobs, and positions in occupational hierarchies. The segmented labor market models developed primarily by sociologists and economic historians, however, characterize labor markets as internally fragmented by such factors as gender, ethnicity, and legal status.

While this work draws heavily upon an anthropological tradition, it strays from much of the anthropology produced about U.S. populations in important ways. It is not, I emphasize, a community study, a study of a specific factory, or even a study of a specific occupational group. The book revolves around case studies in the seafood and poultry processing industries, yet is not a study of seafood and poultry workers themselves as much as the ways these workers fit into larger processes of capitalist expansion and development. The work develops four central themes:

1. First, I argue that clear, identifiable relationships exist between the expansion of capitalism overseas, particularly in Third World regions, and the development of capitalism in the United States.
2. Second, the anthropological literature on the expansion of capitalism into peasant and tribal regions has developed theories that apply to the formation, reorganization, and maintenance of low-wage-labor populations in the United States.
3. Third, low-wage-labor forces in the United States do not just emerge, naturally, as responses to market conditions. Instead, they are constructed, reorganized, and maintained by means of a few common practices. These practices include the use of workers' networks, the reliance on the reproductive labor of workers' households and communities, and the manipulation of community institutions to control labor. Each of these practices also depends on the development and use of myths about specific kinds of workers as compared to others, particularly myths about "the work ethic." By looking at these processes of constructing labor forces, we can more fully understand how low-wage industries come to use new immigrants, minorities, and other workers considered "marginal."
4. Finally, the information presented here leads us to question the application of conventional economic analysis to studies of low-wage labor. This includes neoclassical models as well as the somewhat more accurate split and segmented labor market models.

Besides developing these themes, this work differs from other books on low-wage labor in its approach to the case material as well. The cases of seafood processing, poultry processing, and U.S. farm labor are by no means identical. Instead, they provide informative contrasts. The North Carolina seafood processing industry is, superficially, a "traditional" industry. It is fragmented and technologically simple, where plants are family owned and operated and the work forces relatively small; poultry processing, on the other hand, is ostensibly "modern," composed of a handful of giant corporations whose brands names are known throughout the shopping aisles of America. Poultry firms are highly vertically integrated, employing thousands of workers, and heralded as the model to which modern agribusiness should aspire (Reimund, Martin, and Moore 1981). U.S. agriculture, which provides a smaller share of the case material in this work, includes firms ranging from highly capitalized, corporate-controlled enterprises to small family farms.

While there are clear distinctions between the three, we will see that among their similarities are ways their operations permeate the lives and cultures, the understandings and behaviors, of their workers, organizing the social fabrics by which their workers interact with one another and with people from other cultures. We will see, as well, that the cleanliness of dichotomies like "traditional" and "modern," as elsewhere in the social sciences, cannot withstand much scrutiny.⁴ In the most technologically sophisticated operation can be found primitive, authoritarian labor policies, just as in technologically simple environments we find enlightened employers.

My analysis includes interpretations of both workers' views and behaviors and employers' views and behaviors. Examining capitalists' views is something of a novelty in anthropology. Many studies in political economy and anthropology focus too exclusively on the responses of factory workers, peasants, fishermen, and other so-called "local" populations to the vicissitudes and impositions of multinational corporations, world markets, political structures and practices, and environmental change. At its worst, such a focus bestows a passivity upon the shoulders of those we study, suggesting that their behaviors are reducible to mere responses to processes originating beyond their communities. Far more accurate analyses focus on the ways that workers actively rebel against the often overwhelming political and economic processes into which they have been incorporated and structured.

Yet even these analyses, fine though they often are (e.g. Nash 1979; Stoler 1985b; Ong 1987), fail to delve too deeply into processes that continually revise the terms by which buyers and sellers of labor come together. Too often, that is, anthropologists fail to examine fully the constraints, opportunities, and political and economic processes that influence *employers'* behaviors and attitudes, and how these influence the trajectories of capitalist strategy and power and, ultimately, capital accumulation.

Methodological Considerations

This work is particularly well suited to examining the perspectives of both workers and employers because it undertakes this examination by means of a dialogue between macro and micro levels of observation. The material on seafood processing derives from a highly localized inquiry. By contrast, the poultry processing and farm labor material comes from several locations around the southern and eastern United States. Constructing an understanding from both macro and micro levels of observation is rapidly becoming the suggested approach to social research questions and problems. Unfortunately, anthropological theory and method has not matured enough to provide all the ideas and tools we need to combine local, regional, and national studies. In order to marshal such an investigation, therefore, I draw upon many disciplines in addition to anthropology, most notably sociology, political science, agricultural economics, and economic history.

In this book, although the lion's share of the material comes from seafood and poultry processing and from the U.S. agricultural labor force, I also draw on other studies. The case material derives from research conducted through the 1980s. At its core are two studies that were conducted for different purposes but that overlapped enough to raise issues critical of current approaches to the study of labor in advanced capitalist society. The first was a study of seafood processing in North Carolina. From January, 1985, to December, 1986, I interviewed eighty-three workers in twenty-two randomly selected seafood processing plants in the four eastern North Carolina counties of Beaufort, Brunswick, Carteret, and Pamlico. These counties were selected for their heavy concentrations of processing plants and their high levels of seafood-processing employment. From the workers I gathered sociodemographic data and information related to their participation in the seafood processing and fishing industries. I

supplemented this with participant observations (e.g. fishing excursions), secondary source data collection, and an additional ninety-three open-ended, unstructured interviews with plant owners, other workers, and others familiar with the industry.

The second study focused on the impact of the 1986 Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA) on the poultry industry in the U.S. Southeast. From its beginning, however, the study was designed to situate immigration reform within the broader context of relations between labor and capital in the industry. My experiences with seafood processing workers contributed to this design. In that study, I examined coastal developments such as limited entry programs and real estate development in terms of the ways they were influenced by the relations between capital and labor.

The poultry processing study was conducted in two phases. The first phase lasted from the late spring of 1988 until November of the same year. I collected data on the labor practices and labor market behaviors of poultry workers and plant personnel managers. The plants were located in four regions of the southern and eastern United States. The northernmost region was the Delmarva Peninsula. This is the peninsula east of Washington, D.C., including most of Delaware, portions of Maryland, and most of the eastern shore of Virginia. It extends south to the Chesapeake Bay Bridge Tunnel. The two middle regions were North Carolina and northern Georgia, including Gainesville, Georgia, the city whose water tower boasts, "Poultry Capital of the World." The southernmost region was an area comprised by the northwest corner of Texas and the southeast corner of Arkansas. In this work, we refer to these four regions collectively as the "southeast." This is in keeping with Department of Agriculture publications about the poultry industry (e.g. Lasley 1980), despite the fact that this "southeast" region extends west into Texas and north into Delaware and Maryland. Like the seafood processing counties, these areas were chosen because they had heavy concentrations of poultry plants. Also, I assumed they would each have distinctive local labor market dynamics, especially in terms of their access to new immigrant and refugee populations. This research consisted, again, of a survey supplemented by in-depth interviews and visits to each of the areas. The initial interviews, however, were conducted with plant personnel managers rather than poultry workers. The data collected focussed on plant labor policies, such as wage offers, working conditions, plant ethnic

and sexual compositions, changes in worker compositions over time, use of new immigrants and refugees, attitudes concerning the work habits of various ethnic groups, and recruiting.

During the second phase of the research, which lasted from April, 1989, to May, 1990, I conducted follow-up interviews with plant personnel managers in northern Georgia and North Carolina. Plant managers in these two areas were engaged in the most interesting labor experimentation, drawing heavily on new immigrant and refugee populations. During this same time, for comparative purposes, I interviewed a sample of meat-packing plant personnel managers, workers, and union representatives in southern Minnesota, northern Iowa, and Kansas. Finally, during both phases of the research, more in-depth, face-to-face, open-ended interviews were conducted with poultry and meat packing workers and former workers in all the regions.

Again, I stress that while seafood and poultry studies form the heart of the present volume, I have necessarily drawn upon other research experiences. These include the meat packing study, of course, but also work on Jamaicans who migrate seasonally to the United States to cut sugar cane and pick apples. It was this research that first introduced me to the complexities of U.S. labor processes, particularly those at work in the U.S. farm labor market. These Jamaicans migrate legally, with H2 or "nonimmigrant" class visas, and work under contract in the south Florida sugar fields and the apple harvests of the east and northeast in a kind of indentured servitude status. The H2 program occasionally attracts the press's attention (e.g. Wilkinson 1988), and annually attracts the attention of organized labor and the U.S. Departments of Labor and Justice (Griffith 1984, 1986b). It is a highly controversial labor-importing program, yet it has been expanding. In the late 1980s, in fact, the program served as the legal mechanism for importing Mexican women to process seafood in isolated counties in eastern North Carolina. In the summer of 1991, the American Civil Liberties Union initiated a lawsuit against seafood processors on behalf of these women, charging such violations as underpayments of wages, servitude, and poor working conditions.

Yet another study that influences this presentation is one that examines relations between wage labor and small-scale fishing in Puerto Rican fishing households (Griffith, Valdes Pizzini, and Johnson 1989). Analyzing life histories of fishermen, we are attempting to determine ways that small-scale producer activities

influence participation in wage labor markets. Finally, this study draws on current, ongoing ethnographic research on the United States farm labor force, conducted in farm labor areas in Puerto Rico and the eastern, midwestern, and western United States.

Although the studies may seem only loosely related, all of them involve the mobilization of labor for food production, which itself offers some unifying direction to the analysis. Industries that produce foodstuffs suffer from labor problems that derive, in large part, from their producing perishable commodities under relatively adverse, often seasonal working conditions. Agricultural harvests, seafood processing, and poultry processing plants have difficulty attracting and retaining stable, reliable work forces. This difficulty has been diluted, at certain historical periods, by political mechanisms that assure adequate labor supplies. These have included slavery, indentured servitude, debt peonage, vagrancy laws, or legal programs to import workers from other countries or regions (Daniel 1972). In addition, the basic importance of food has made these industries more immune to high labor standards than other industries. Nevertheless, from the labor demand side, these industries are particularly susceptible to changes in labor processes based on changing local economic growth or decline and changing state or federal labor policy. From the labor supply side, workers in industries like these are often considered "marginal" to the labor force. Their work forces include large proportions of unskilled workers, women, minorities, illegal immigrants, temporary legally imported workers, refugees, students, the mentally retarded, and prisoners on work release programs. Most such workers are considered marginal primarily because they enter wage labor markets seasonally, irregularly, and at a distinct disadvantage. Usually they have little education or inappropriate language abilities and limited employment opportunities. Like the plants themselves, marginal workers are also particularly susceptible to changing political economic environments. They may be forced into unemployment and homelessness by shifts in immigration policy, welfare reform, and the low-wage industrial recruitment policies pursued by local and federal governments all over the world. Also, many marginal workers move among low-wage labor, domestic production, petty commodity production, unemployment, and informal economic activities. This movement further entrenches their status as marginal workers.

Their marginality has made them only a little less elusive to social science than they have been to government reporting systems and modern economic theories of the labor force under advanced capitalism. Many remain unemployed and impoverished, despite their numerical importance. The “food system”—including production, transportation, wholesale, and retail (markets and restaurants) sectors—employs more people in the United States and the world than any other sector of the economy. In the aggregate, food companies spend more money on advertising than any other industrial sector, including the automotive industry. As such, they exert a great influence over the role models we look to for advice on what to put into our bodies. A variety of government programs, subsidies, and legal and political supports are used within the food system to keep food costs low. These programs often have direct negative effects on food system workers. Different segments of the food system have been differentially affected by the growth of labor unions and the struggles among labor, capital, and the state surrounding access to new supplies of more pliant, tractable workers. Within the food system, low-wage workers, legal and illegal immigrants, and refugees tend to concentrate at both ends: in farm work and food processing on the one hand, and in restaurants and other retail outlets on the other. As crucial parts of the food system—production and delivery—these cases provide insight into the ways advanced capitalist labor processes have been changing since the Second World War. Seafood and poultry processing provide particularly compelling examples. In recent years, spurred by increased consumer demand for white meats, poultry and seafood processing plants have been expanding in ways that stress the traditional ways many plants satisfy their labor needs. New labor supplies have been tapped, and old supplies massaged and milked for new workers. Processing plants have relocated and reoriented segments of rural economies and labor markets. In some cases, pioneering labor processes have developed to deal with even more chronic labor supply problems. In others, industry expansion and its associated labor needs have reinforced old stereotypes about workers and work. Still others have reincarnated old methods of labor exploitation in new, and newly disguised, ways, grafting them onto modern organizational structures and supposedly “enlightened” corporate cultures. Finally, a few firms have experimented with involving workers in plant management, product quality, and the operation of the enterprise.

From these case studies, then, emerges an analysis, and a complex story, of low-wage labor in an advanced capitalist economy. It focuses on the ways low-wage labor markets form over time, and how these formative processes both depend on and disrupt workers' homes, domestic producer activities, social networks, and communities. These cases are seated in global political economic processes that influence the currents of world trade and capital accumulation and hence the movement of capital and labor between developed and underdeveloped parts of the world. Within these trends, cases of industries, migrations, employers' attitudes, workers' behaviors in labor markets, and the lifestyles that allow and conform to such behaviors offer critical comment and reflection on the political economics of the last half of the twentieth century.

Seafood Processing, Poultry Processing, and Agriculture Within the Culture and Political Economy of the Rural South

By now, most of us have heard that the U.S. economy is undergoing change, moving from an economy based on manufacturing to a service-and-information economy. This has been accompanied by more integrated ties with international markets for labor, raw materials, finished commodities, and capital. At the same time, reports in the popular media have highlighted employment trends that social scientists and other observers have been addressing for the past fifteen years. At least since the mid-1970s, and arguably much earlier, domestic primary-sector employment (blue collar, unionized, heavy industry) has been losing ground to domestic secondary, service-sector employment and to international labor markets (Frobel, Heinrichs, and Kreye 1977; Gordon, Edwards, and Reich 1982). Population movements in the United States and between the United States and its Caribbean and Latin American neighbors have both reflected and reorganized the new labor processes. While many areas of the middle and northern United States have experienced slow or stagnated growth, the Sun Belt, Mid-Atlantic, and Pacific coasts have experienced steady, at times impressive, demographic and economic growth. Yet the trajectory of economic activity and investment has been anything but even and predictable. Between 1969 and 1976, for example, while 7.5 million jobs were created by new and expanded plants in the South Atlantic states, another 5.5 million jobs were lost due to plant closings or contractions

(Bluestone and Harrison 1982). Throughout this period, the economies of many states in the South continued to grow. In North Carolina, for example, investments to expand and open industries between 1969 and 1976 totaled 4.2 billion dollars, creating 133,771 jobs (North Carolina County Profiles 1985: 16). Since 1976, growth has continued at even faster rates, with industrial investment between 2 and 5 billion dollars per year and more than a half million jobs created between 1976 and today.

Yet other statistics do not provide cause for celebration, lending support to the fact that the performance of the U.S. economy since the early 1970s has been mixed. Most telling has been the slow growth in rates of unemployment, particularly among minorities. Less visible but equally distressing, the reorganization of the economy has caused many of the unemployed, following their last unemployment benefit checks, to return to jobs with lower wages, fewer benefits, and less desirable working conditions. In short, the unemployed have become underemployed. In North Carolina the unemployment rate climbed from 4.3 percent in 1970 to 6.7 percent in 1984, with some years witnessing rates of upwards of 10 percent and some groups—particularly women and minorities—experiencing, at times, nearly 20 percent unemployment. For every 6.7 individuals employed between 1970 and 1984, one person was added to the list of the unemployed, further swelling the pool of available labor and people willing to take low-wage or temporary jobs. While per capita income in North Carolina more than tripled during this period, transfer payments increased six times.

North Carolina's experience is not unique. The recession of the late 1980s and early 1990s has been characterized by economists as "ragged," with areas such as the Northeast suffering while some southern and western regions show signs of lowered unemployment and growth. Even so, pockets of poverty and dispossession can be found in less than an hour's drive in nearly any direction from any point in the South. Small and large communities throughout Texas, Oklahoma, Arkansas, and Louisiana have been struggling through the eighties, reeling from an overdependence on oil during a glutted oil market that benefits most of the rest of the nation. Some counties report unemployment rates of as high as 12 percent for the general population and over 15 percent among blacks (Texas Employment Commission 1988). Throughout the South, while state and regional unemployment statistics suggest an increasingly gainfully employed work

force, discrepancies between rural and urban counties are often so great that areas less than fifty miles from one another can have unemployment rates that differ by as many as ten percentage points (Rosenfeld, Bergman, and Rubin 1985), placing workers in positions similar to those described in passage after passage in Steinbeck's classic epic of proletarianization: "They had no argument, no system, nothing but their numbers and their needs. When there was work for a man, ten men fought for it—fought for a low wage. If that fella'll work for thirty cents, I'll work for twenty-five" (1939: 363-364).

Examples such as these testify to the confusion over the state of the southern economy and the ease with which we can use census tracts and other official statistics to paint a portrait that is alternately rosy and bleak.⁵ The general cultural contours of the South are less hazy. Its racism is legendary, as well as its paternalism and patriotism and the deepening persistence of its Evangelical Christian heritage. To some extent, our understanding of southern culture must depend on the way these features of southern living shape and respond to the economic and social trends reflected in the statistics.

At the pit of southern culture, of course, is its history of plantation agriculture and slavery. Despite the very real heterogeneity of the present-day South, this history participates in the way new immigrant groups—whether bourgeois, petty bourgeois, or proletariat—become parts of the region. The slave plantation, that land-labor institution that survived until late last century, continues to set the stage for social and cultural identity and to influence hiring practices and southern labor processes. Relations between Blacks and Whites have improved very little, despite widely publicized political gains among Blacks. That Atlanta elects a Black mayor means little, either materially or emotionally, to hundreds of thousands of residents of thousands of rural southern communities. The urban, cosmopolitan, seemingly "enlightened" South has, in many respects, tried to divorce itself from the Old, the antebellum South. Some of the means used to divorce urban from rural or new from old are quite conscious, quite deliberate, such as learning to lose one's drawl or engaging in aggressive industrial recruitment of Yankee and even foreign-owned and -managed companies. Others are less within the spheres of control of southerners or southern communities, such as the necessity of submitting to interest rates and other fiscal matters decided in New York or Tokyo.

Yet the Old South has not been excised from Montgomery or Birmingham or Spartanburg or Richmond anymore than the Bells Forks, Nagadocheses, Carthages, or Spivey's Corners have escaped the influence of other regions of the United States, or even the Caribbean and Central and South America. Since the Second World War in particular, the "southern crusade" to change from an agrarian to an industrial power has increasingly confused the distinctiveness of southern identity, though failing to erode some of its most fundamental features (Cobb 1982). The residue of slavery still collects at the center of southern racism. Significantly, it also underlies much of the region's religious tradition, which has, in turn, promoted successful campaigns against organized labor, where local ministers told their flocks that CIO stood for "Christ Is Out" (Cobb 1982). The Holy Trinity of Slavery, Fundamentalist Christianity, and Anti-Unionism is no more coincidental than the relationship between apartheid and Christian Nationalism in South Africa:

The original cause of Southern distinctiveness was slavery and the society that slavery engendered, an astonishingly complex society whose ruling classes steadfastly maintained that the whole thing was simple, after all, that God had ordained slavery and had ordained a superior class of white men to protect the helpless, simpleminded, innocent black who could not possibly survive as a free creature. As blacks were set so low on the human scale that they were hardly more than beasts, white Southerners—their keepers—elevated themselves to become heirs of mythical and divinely ordained aristocracy directly out of the pages of Sir Walter Scott. (Maurius 1984: 143-144)

More than any other ethnic group, the Black presence has shaped and flavored the southern experience. Political zoning, relations between the federal and state and local governments, labor union activity, housing, entitlement programs—to name only a few—have all centered around the political and economic participation (and nonparticipation) of Blacks. But to assume Blacks in America or the South constitute a homogeneous ethnic group masks the complexity of Black adaptation to institutional and individual racism and the many relations between cities and regions that reflect the Black migrations of this century—from Jackson, Mississippi to Chicago to work in the stockyards; from

Birmingham or Nashville into Gary, Indiana steel mills; from Macon, Georgia to automobile plants in Dearborn or Detroit. Between 1900 and 1930, an estimated 1.3 million Blacks streamed into northern industry, fitting into low slots in the occupational hierarchies and undermining labor organization (Gordon, Edwards, and Reich 1982). These migrations created enduring links between southern and northern Black communities, leading to the formation of migrant networks that still result in exchanges of goods and services, in long-distance visiting and child rearing, and in the flow of information, speech patterns, musical styles, educational goals, political consciousness, economic aspirations.

More recently, the established southern social classes and underclasses—professionals, farmers, rednecks, Blacks, etc.—have been experiencing influxes of legal and illegal immigrants and refugees from the Caribbean, Central and South America, and Southeast Asia. The coastal zones, primarily Florida and Texas, have received the most national attention, but Mexicans, Haitians, Guatemalans, Vietnamese, Kampuchians, Jamaicans, Thai, Cubans, Puerto Ricans, and other immigrant and refugee groups have filtered into rural and urban areas throughout the South. With few exceptions, these groups tend to be incorporated into the low-wage, low-status sectors of local economies, at times displacing native Black and White workers and at other times complementing them. Although they occupy economic positions similar to those of native Whites and Blacks, we will see that the ways they fit into southern ideology are quite distinct from the ways either Whites or Blacks fit in.

Added to the ethnic, sexual, regional, and social complexity of southern labor processes that have emerged from these demographic trends, are the impacts of the new international division of labor (Frobel, Heinrichs, and Kreye 1977; Nash and Fernandez Kelley 1983; Sanderson 1985). It is no coincidence that this new international division of labor has developed along with a renewed southern crusade for low-wage industrial recruitment (Vass 1979; Cobb 1982). Many southern states that were once host to furniture, textile, garment, and other manufacturing industries have been especially hard hit by the flight of cloth and clothing manufacturers to border industrialization programs in Mexico or competition from the garment districts of Singapore, Sri Lanka, Malaysia, and other Third World areas (Rosenfeld, Bergman, and Rubin 1985). While other, both traditional and new industries, including food processing, absorb some individuals thrown out

of work by the overseas flight of capital, the composite effect on regions crippled by plant closings has been a general reduction in standards of living and the quality of life. People emigrate and schools stand abandoned. Pigeons roost in the radiators. Businesses close, houses fall down, and even the local roads deteriorate under a shrinking tax base at a time when demand for human services is at an all-time high (Nash 1983). The toll on human mental and physical health and family life is measurable in suicides, lost homes, drained bank accounts, divorces, and all the other consequences of guilt, failure, and loss chronicled by Kathy Newman in her excellent work on the experience of downward mobility in America (1988).

The mid-1970s and 1980s have also seen the erosion of both the powers and public support of organized labor. During these years, the labor unions representing workers in jobs such as food processing have been suffering from attempts to concentrate and consolidate power, expanding their bureaucracies, and operating against a pervasive anti-union climate in the United States, the heart of which was Reagan's firing of air-traffic controllers and the reluctance of traditional supporters of organized labor to support the PATCO strike. According to a recent study of the fired air-traffic controllers, the PATCO strikers:

...see the strike as a watershed event that forever altered the landscape of American labor relations. The controllers are hardly alone in this view. Labor defeats as remote as the failed 1987 strike of the National Football League players have been traced to the PATCO debacle. The controllers' strike is an instance of 'original sin' from which the decline of unions, the 'givebacks' in contract negotiations in many industries, and the hard luck of the once-inviolable commercial airline pilots directly followed. (Newman 1988: 170)

More directly relevant to this study, and equally telling of the current problems facing organized labor, labor's weakness relative to the strength of capital came to the forefront during the lengthy dispute between Austin, Minnesota's local P-9, affiliated with United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW), and Hormel, which ended only after UFCW international withdrew its support of local P-9, dividing the city of Austin and leaving a legacy of continued attempts to form a union that will rival UFCW (Hage and Klauda 1988; *Austin Daily Herald*, April 21, 1989).

The nature of the growth of organized labor in poultry and meat packing certainly contributed to labor's failure at Hormel. Ironically, much of the current weakness derives from the gains made by unions between their early, formative years (1930 to 1941) and their years of growth following World War II. Political and organization successes prior to the 1960s helped legitimate organized labor (e.g. the association between Democratic party politics and organized labor; the Wagner Act; the Social Security Act—see Gordon, Edwards, and Reich 1982), establishing unions and collective bargaining as normal components of many of the larger firms in such cornerstone industries as automobiles, steel, coal mining, meat packing, and, later, clothing and textiles. While making great strides, however, the union movement left large segments of the U.S. working classes and underclasses unrepresented. Union strength and the character of union membership varied regionally, by industry, by size of firm, and by the location of firms in company bureaucracies and production hierarchies. Some union locals were more susceptible to sexism and racism than others; some were more parts of the social landscapes of their home communities than others; some more at peace with management. Despite these variations, the large, umbrella organizations—the American Federation of Labor (AFL) and the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO)—grew, the former absorbing organizations of skilled crafts and trades people and the latter absorbing smaller unions composed primarily of unskilled or semiskilled workers. When, in 1955, the AFL and CIO joined hands, the merger set the stage for what current unionized workers view as a level of bureaucratic and organizational complexity that cannot help but engender suspicion and mistrust between national, regional, and local offices and the rank and file. Similar to the corporate mergers that have become common through the 1980s, the large unions have been more concerned with short-term goals (membership increases, dues) than with long-term planning. As a result, they have not been uniformly responsive to the changing demographic climates in the United States.

The principal union representing workers who handle and process food today is the UFCW, which emerged out of a merger between the Amalgamated Meat Cutters and Butcher Workmen of North America and the Retail Clerks' International Association, establishing a union that was 1.2 million people strong but that

diluted the relative importance of meat and poultry processing workers in the union as a whole. Workers I interviewed who took part in the Hormel strike held the opinion that the merger significantly weakened the bargaining power of packing house workers. This was considered the worst blow to a united meat-packing work force since the United Packinghouse Workers of America, a more militant union that achieved strength during the 1930s, was absorbed by Amalgamated Meat Cutters in 1968. According to a fifty-two-year veteran of meat packing, the UFCW has become less interested in improving working conditions or wages than in enlarging its membership:

In Colorado they represented store clerks in a supermarket chain. The first thing they agreed to was to replace full time people with part time people, doubling their membership but negotiating wages down to the minimum. UFCW executives have adopted a corporate image. They fly in jets and have their own dining room. They've forgotten what it means to be on the floor. More members means more dues, and more dues means more gas for the UFCW jet.

The erosion of labor's power and the uneven representation of workers by unions, combined with new immigrations and other demographic developments, has created new opportunities for labor recruitment and labor control. Yet many industries still experience labor supply and retention problems. The paradox of a labor supply problem amidst apparent surpluses of low-wage labor (from plant closings, economic restructuring, and immigration) required at least a generation to develop. Like many traditional, rural industries earlier in the postwar era, the processing plants witnessed their labor forces being drawn away by somewhat higher-paying, year-round, more prestigious job opportunities created when companies fled the unionized, high-wage North for the nonunionized, low-wage South (Wissman 1950; Cobb 1984, 1982). Compared to factory jobs, the sometimes seasonal, spotty, smelly, piecework, processing jobs were far less attractive to new low-wage working women and minorities. During periods of economic growth, work in the processing plants—much like jobs in agricultural harvests—became associated with the least skilled, lowest class, and most marginal sectors of the labor force. Even when plant closings replenished the labor pool, the

damage done to the image of processing jobs was too great to assure these new unemployed people would not rather emigrate than hang live chickens, shuck oysters, debone turkey breasts, or pick crabs. In Washington, North Carolina, the small county seat of Beaufort County, I spoke with workers who had recently been laid off from a plant that made small kitchen appliances; they were picking crabs, but they told me they were actively seeking "any other job." While sitting in a turkey plant's personnel office, I watched two men and a woman quit within ten minutes time. The woman was an American Indian who boasted that her Indian status had allowed her to land a better job. Then, as though not wishing to perpetuate any myth of Native American laziness or drunkenness, she added, "It isn't just a matter of quitting. I've got another job." In a small, isolated town in southern North Carolina, three oyster shuckers told me they hoped my questions about their employment histories meant that I would be coming back to hire them to do something else. In the words of one crab-picking-plant owner: "These people would rather do anything besides pick crab." In the words of a chicken plant personnel manager in Georgia: "The work ethic has gone to hell. I wish I could get some boat people."

Yet some personnel managers have, in fact, gotten some boat people, while others have stimulated migrations from half-way around the world and still others continue to draw workers exclusively from local labor pools. What accounts for these differences? How can one firm attract workers from thousands of miles away to cut the wings off birds for eight hours a day? Why does another firm, offering the same wage under similar working conditions, simply dip into a pile of applications for locals to do exactly the same tasks? How do these practices permeate workers' lives, networks, and communities? Just by posing these questions, we express dissatisfaction with current interpretations and explanations of low-wage labor under advanced capitalism. The prevailing theories about labor under advanced capitalism have failed to keep pace with the way capital has changed and adapted to new demographic and cultural developments. By contrast, anthropologists have been working in contexts where capital has been expanding and adapting to new cultural, social, and political economic settings. The insights from these studies, discussed in the following chapter, thus provide a good starting point for reconsider-