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Think Globally, Film Locally [Review of the Ann Lewis film *Morristown*]

Abstract

[Excerpt] *Morristown* brings to life the human element missing from the political and legal analysis of the issues presented in this symposium issue. The hour-long documentary takes us back and forth from an Eastern Tennessee region that has seen a rapid influx of Mexican immigrants to the villages and factory zones in Mexico where these immigrants started their journeys. The alternation has a powerful, accelerating effect for the contrasts it portrays but also for the similarities of globalization's effects on working people in both countries.

Keywords

Morristown, documentary, film, Tennessee, immigration, globalization

Disciplines

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Comments

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Think Globally, Film Locally

Review by Lance Compt

Morristown

Documentary Film

Ann Lewis, Producer & Director

60 minutes

In English and Spanish with Subtitles

Morristown brings to life the human element missing from the political and legal analysis of the issues presented in this symposium issue. The hour-long documentary takes us back and forth from an Eastern Tennessee region that has seen a rapid influx of Mexican immigrants to the villages and factory zones in Mexico where these immigrants started their journeys. The alternation has a powerful, accelerating effect for the contrasts it portrays but also for the similarities of globalization's effects on working people in both countries.

While immigrants have migrated to Eastern Tennessee searching for employment, many of the electrical, electronics, and auto parts factories that provided decent jobs for local Tennessee workers have closed and moved operations to Mexico. Traditionally, the work in these factories was hard but not usually grueling. The grueling work in Eastern Tennessee was on farms and in chicken-processing factories throughout the region. The 40- and 50-year-old workers laid off from the manufacturing plants could not make thousands of hard knife cuts per shift on a chicken processing line, or fill buckets with tomatoes and run to keep pace with trucks taking their loads. Immigrants filled these jobs.

Director Ann Lewis builds the film around intimate portraits of these American and Mexican workers. Her film conveys common, simple bonds of humanity. At the same time, it reflects, and reflects on, the complexities of international trade, investment, and migration between the United States and Mexico, especially the impact of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA). *Morristown* has a political and policy message critical of NAFTA and the trade model it represents, but the film avoids preaching, instead letting the workers tell their own stories. This liberty allows viewers to experience their own reactions to the complexities of international trade and migration.

In *Morristown*, immigrant workers are not economic units for study by researchers and analysts. The film shows the pain of immigrants' separation from their families, the hard physical labor that they perform, and the

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small joys that the immigrants still manage to find in lives far from home. It also shows the humanity of black and white working-class Tennesseans as they move from resentment towards understanding and empathy for immigrants.

The remarkable work of the Tennessee Industrial Renewal Network (TIRN) is an important part of the story. TIRN, which local activists (including Professor Fran Ansley, a contributor to this volume and to Ann Lewis' film) created to shape a community response to the wrenching plant closings that affected Eastern Tennessee, organized a series of visits to Mexico by Tennessee workers. *Morristown* follows one of the delegations on its trip, showing how, if a picture is worth a thousand words, face-to-face human contact is worth a million.

Lewis' skillful counterpoint of Tennessee and Mexico scenes pulls viewers into the narrative. We see trucks full of live chickens plying Tennessee roads, while Tennessee workers recount the factory closings that changed their lives. Then, a TIRN delegation, most of them laid-off women, visits one of the relocated factories in the *maquiladora* zone along the U.S.-Mexico border. The factory's American manager avoids serious discussion and skirts the women's question about wage levels in the plant. "I think it's two-and-a-half or three times the minimum wage," he replies (making it about 15 dollars a day). In separate meetings, factory workers tell the American visitors of their fears about organizing a union because it would "challenge the government." *Maquiladora* owners and government officials often collude to suppress independent, worker-initiated unions in Mexico, preferring government- and management-pliant "white unions" with "protection contracts"—so-called because they protect management against genuine independent unions.¹

Back in Tennessee, a scene of Mexican farm laborers stooping, scrambling, and racing to lift and load heavy bucketfuls of tomatoes onto trucks jolts the viewer with the intensity of the physical labor involved. A companion scene of the men sleeping fourteen to a barracks-style dormitory room is equally affecting.

Returning to Mexico, we see a village bereft of its men. Only women work there, trying to prepare meals from corn scratched out of the land. Earlier these women could sell it to tortilla producers, but under NAFTA more efficiently mass-produced corn from Nebraska and Iowa has displaced home-grown corn in Mexican markets.

Another Tennessee scene ranges from a Chamber of Commerce meeting about attracting new business to interviews with chicken growers and mushroom workers. One of the workers speculates that forming a union might address some of their problems, setting the stage for an important story to follow.

1. For a full discussion of labor organizing and collective bargaining in Mexico, see AM. CTR. FOR INT'L LABOR SOLIDARITY, JUSTICE FOR ALL: THE STRUGGLE FOR WORKER RIGHTS IN MEXICO (2003), available at <http://www.solidaritycenter.org/content.asp?content id=516>.

Lewis could have narrated the inclination of many Americans to be insular toward their foreign neighbors. Lewis easily could have found Tennessee workers to articulate anti-immigrant sentiment. Indeed, the film does not suggest that all local workers have noble, solidarity-driven attitudes towards immigrants in Tennessee, but nothing beats the astonishing statement by an interviewed local prosecutor (holding a law degree and probably benefiting more than local workers from the labor of immigrants) spouting off to the effect that “murder is a cultural value” among Mexicans. The message is more powerful because it illustrates that even ‘educated’ Americans, Americans whose jobs are not threatened by the arrival of new workers, have negative feelings towards Mexican immigrants.

Back in Mexico, the Tennessee workers meet General Electric and General Motors workers in their homes with no running water. The head of a local *maquiladora* factory owners’ association tells the Tennessee visitors that such poverty is just “the cruelty of the global economy” –certainly not anyone’s fault.

Morristown returns to Tennessee to capture a union-organizing effort by workers at the big Koch Foods chicken-processing plant. Workers talk about conditions and how they hope that a collective bargaining agreement can help. TIRN organizers and local civil rights, religious, and community activists supported the United Food and Commercial Workers’ organizing drive. Community pressure helped the union win an unusual agreement from company management *not* to run an aggressive anti-union campaign, a norm for American managers fighting union efforts.² Instead, Koch Foods lets the workers decide their own course without management interference.

The camera captures the elation of the workers’ overwhelming election victory (465-18), but it does not suggest its exceptional circumstances. That is fine. The film is not about union organizing and its ramifications, but it does convey the sense that workers’ self-organization can improve conditions. Compare this with the feature Hollywood film, *Fast Food Nation*, which dramatically treats many of the same issues of immigrants’ poor working conditions. The film, however, never mentions organizing or unions. Instead, the heroine sleeps with her supervisor to improve her lot.

The stories in *Morristown* are intimate and so are the camera angles. Much of the power in the film comes from long close-up shots capturing the subtle shifts in expression and emotion as the mostly working-class interviewees struggle to tell their stories. The film concludes with a black Tennessee woman who lost her factory job expressing her identification with her Mexican immigrant neighbors. She says simply, “They struggle.” Is this a case of sentimentalizing workers’ solidarity? Yes, but her state-

2. For a full discussion of U.S. management anti-union campaign tactics and their effects, see LANCE COMPA, HUMAN RIGHTS WATCH, UNFAIR ADVANTAGE: WORKERS’ FREEDOM OF ASSOCIATION IN THE UNITED STATES UNDER INTERNATIONAL HUMAN RIGHTS STANDARDS (Cynthia Brown ed., 2000), available at <http://www.hrw.org/reports/2000/uslabor/index.htm#TopOfPage>.

ment is also true, and it drives home the film's valuable message: solidarity across borders, although not a magic bullet for the negative effects of globalization, is a powerful way of responding.