

# Culture on the Line: Labor and Hegemony in Eastern Appalachia

Adam Benjamin, West Virginia University History and Anthropology

## Background

### Moorefield Background

- Hardy County, West Virginia has had an emergent poultry industry since the 1930s.
- It grew to fruition in the 1970s and continues to grow until this day following consolidation by Pilgrim's Pride
- Work in the poultry industry was also shifting from a highly unionized and relatively skilled occupation to a low union-density and de-skilled job.

### Theoretical Background

- *Uneven Development* (Smith 2010)
- De-skilling and labor discipline (Braverman 1998)
- (Re)-construction of race/Wages of Whiteness (Du Bois 1998)
  - Poultry fix of Stuesse and Ribas (2016 and 2016)



## Methodology

Several methods were employed for this study to get the broadest perspective possible while under covid-19 restrictions. Because of the short time limit on the project and the length of an IRB, I was also unable to access refugee workers who would be counted as a vulnerable population. It was also not possible to work in the plant for participant observation. Methods therefore included:

- **Direct Observation:** multiple visits to Moorefield, mapping, photographing, entering the factory, etc.
- **Informant Interview:** discussions with multiple former employees, locals.
- **Archival Sources:** the use of newspaper articles to construct a history of the cultural consolidation of the industry
- **Facebook Data:** reading threads and arguments in local community Facebook groups to analyze discourse around the industry and potential cracks in the established hegemony

## Results

### Direct Observation

- High level of industry consolidation across the board
- Large numbers of farms contract for Pilgrim's and Pilgrim's exists as sole industry
- Cultural consolidation as a form of hegemony
- Internal regime of management

### Interviews and Archival:

- Management cliques
- Labor shortages and labor discipline
- Commissioners and politicians beholden to Pilgrim's
- Cultural consolidation over time
- "Dixie Mentality" and frontline labor
  - Informant reports many white residents have this mentality
- High turnover rates safeguarded by de-skilling

### Facebook Data:

- Hegemony is strong and powerful, but not solid, much disagreement over company intentions and working conditions exists
- Many upset with life at plant
- Refuse to work there again, creating shortages and sign-on bonuses



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## Abstract

In Moorefield, West Virginia, the Pilgrim's Pride plant has consolidated the existing poultry industry to a formidable, vertically integrated, industrial complex. Employing many foreign-born refugee workers alongside regional and local workers with little options, the plant has crafted a high degree of local hegemony. Asking how industry maintains hegemony in company towns, in this study I explored the ways in which Pilgrim's Pride has built this hegemony and the cracks that emerge from it. Using informant interviews, archival sources, direct observation, and Facebook data, I looked into the intricacies of the processes at work. Ultimately, I argue that this control was built through the socio-cultural hegemony on the outside of the factory, via the re-construction of race and industry consolidation, and labor discipline and de-skilling on the inside. While specific in case study, this is the story of an Appalachia very much in the 21st Century.

## Conclusions

There is a strong relationship between internal labor discipline and management in the factory and cultural consolidation and hegemony on the outside. But this hegemony is not static. As Pilgrim's looks to expand and consolidate their operation, these hegemonic relations could erupt.

- Non-white, isolated refugee workers kept as a labor buffer to maintain against shortages.
- Re-construction of whiteness
- Refusal to work as resistance to hegemony
  - Evidenced by both rhetoric and desperation of company
- Facebook group as public forum concerning company

## References

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