Tobacco Reconsidered: Ongoing Omissions, Original Outlooks in the Slipstreams of Experience, Global Health, and Critical Industry Studies

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Abstract

Nearly a decade ago, we published the first Annual Review of Anthropology article on tobacco (Kohrman & Benson 2011). Since then, much has happened, and much has persisted regarding human-tobacco relations. Here, we present a stocktaking of how scholars drawing on anthropological methods have responded.
INTRODUCTION

More people than ever before are exposed to tobacco smoke on a daily basis. Cigarettes have reaffirmed their ignominious title as the most significant cause of preventable death worldwide each year. Health campaigns against smoking have disproportionately benefited the wealthy, while tobacco has increasingly victimized the poor. So-called innovators have continued a century-long scheme to hook people on reputedly safer ways of inhaling nicotine, with vape technology being the tactic du jour. And, unrelentingly, Big Tobacco and its investors have been cashing in. Until a 2018 dip, tobacco stocks recorded a decade-long run in which their prices, on average, grew 14 times greater than stocks globally; and since the dip they have still been generating dividends, on average, 400% above the S&P 500’s norm (Paulson & Lock 2017, Ryan 2019).

Meanwhile, when it comes to the topic of tobacco, anthropology and allied disciplines have been generally idle. This is puzzling. Why do ethnographically minded researchers continue to give short shrift to tobacco relative to other health and environmental problems? Is it the ostensible misalignment between (a) the cigarette smoker, as depicted by Big Tobacco and many in public health—as a free-minded, rational decision maker, forewarned of tobacco’s risks—and (b) the genre of the suffering subject, a scholarly trope which ethnographers have often used to illuminate the victims of infectious diseases, extreme poverty, and other drug addictions? Is it that anthropologists have allowed themselves to become ever more blinkered to the accelerating humanitarian annihilation wrought by the tobacco industry because they themselves encounter tobacco increasingly less in their own residential and occupational enclaves? Whatever the impediments may be to adequate scholarly coverage, the modest number of publications pertaining to tobacco produced recently by anthropologists and scholars in allied disciplines deserves our attention and merits our renewed review.

ILLUMINATING SMOKERS’ PHENOMENOLOGY

To begin, a split has opened up in recent ethnographic work between, on the one hand, attention to the experiential worlds of smokers and, on the other, a focus on industry. The former can be seen in contributions to an emergent literature on e-cigarette users. Studying English-language online forums devoted to vaping, Annechino & Antin (2016) nimbly illuminate how e-cigarette users can sometimes feel caught between their own antipathy for Big Tobacco and experiences of being misunderstood, misrepresented, and maligned by academic perspectives that prioritize health over pleasure. Studying e-cigarettes in France, Bevan argues for an experience-near approach in order to “refram[e] smoking as a sensory practice,” rather than as one overshadowed by “omnipresent imagery of disease, disfigurement, and morbidity” (Bevan 2015). Bevan also calls for richer scholarly appreciation of e-cigarettes’ value as substitutes for conventional tobacco products, on the grounds that these technologies “provide occasions for social bonding, gustatory pleasure, and the nonmedicalized management of health” (Bevan 2016, p. 228), a claim that eerily parallels some of the very benefits that vape companies espouse.

A broader set of arguments appears in work regarding the smoking of combustible tobacco. Reed’s 2007 publication, inadvertently missed by our 2011 Annual Review article, is a good place to begin. Here, he describes how smoking cigarettes increasingly saturated his life and scholarship after starting fieldwork in a Papua New Guinea high-security prison. This is perhaps the first ethnography to apply theories of new materialism to study tobacco in carceral contexts. Hand-rolled cigarettes are highly valued things in the prison economy that Reed examines. Undergirded by gangs smuggling in tobacco and a dearth of cash, cigarettes provide a “constitutive logic” for inmates’ lives and relationships (Reed 2007, p. 33). Similarly centered on the sociality of combustible tobacco use is Mimi Nichter’s 2015 book. Lighting Up is the most sustained treatment
to date of what has come to be called in North America “social smoking”: a type of low-level or intermittent tobacco use typically occurring amidst playful, group activities, frequently where alcohol is present. Nichter unravels how, despite declining aggregate smoking rates in the United States, social smoking among young adults has grown, propping up some of the highest levels of tobacco use among any U.S. age cohort. She basis her analyses on long-term ethnographic research which she conducted at a midwestern U.S. college. In such educational settings, Big Tobacco’s marketing to youth has been transformed in such educational settings, Nichter shows, into “tunnels of influence,” wherein students find new sensual pleasure in cigarette consumption, unencumbered by the stigma that has otherwise blanketed combustible tobacco use in recent decades among the well-educated (Nichter 2015, p. 18).

A more confounding set of phenomenologically oriented analyses appears in work authored by Bell & Dennis (2013). These scholars perceive nefarious political and moral valences in public health’s efforts to delimit human exposure to tobacco, epitomized in their minds by the World Health Organization’s passage of the Framework Convention on Tobacco Control (FCTC), which has been endorsed by more than 150 member countries. As a remedy, they “intend to (re)locate...smoking in the contexts of the lives of smoking persons,” inviting us “into the life worlds of smokers, and how they experience smoking itself” (Bell & Dennis 2013, p. 4). The reader thus receives a portrait of “life worlds” that foregrounds human agency, people’s understandings of risk, and identities that individuals nurture through smoking—a portrait that dramatically discounts the power of corporate marketing, dynamics of addiction, and influences of capital. The vision offered here of a repressive public health regime both echoes Big Tobacco rhetoric and reflects a common misreading of biopolitical theory. Misconstrued is the fact that Foucault “emphasizes that power is not only negative and repressive but can also be positive, productive and enabling” (Välipäkangas & Seeck 2011, p. 816).

In her 2016 monograph, Dennis argues against an anti-tobacco/pro-tobacco binary and claims that the interests of the tobacco industry and those of public health are not always opposed in practice. These points are vitally important and have been made previously by many medical anthropologists (e.g., Benson, Kohrman, Nichter, and Nichter). Rather than building on that literature, Dennis reflects on cigarette consumers’ experiences, emphasizing how biopolitical governance is corrosive to their phenomenologies, all the while sidestepping how her reflections reinforce Big Tobacco’s libertarian tenets (Dennis 2016).

ILLUMINATING SUPPLY CHAINS

The past decade has also seen publication of a string of penetrating works that analyze cigarette supply chains as well as the challenges of studying them anthropologically. For instance, Benson (2018) considers reflexively the difficulties of studying ethnographically people associated with supply chains (at all levels and registers), in light of the potent political and moral stakes, meanings, and identities bound up with participations, involvements, oppositions, and complicities. He describes how his earlier book on the tobacco industry diminished the complexities of American tobacco farmers’ lives for the sake of an overarching polemic about the industry.

Welker (2017) carries us beyond the Global North in her multifaceted study of “Kretek capitalism.” She shows, for instance, how Philip Morris International is building a consumer base in Indonesia by using global health initiatives, namely the FCTC, to undermine an informal clove cigarette market via rhetorics of formalization, product safety, public health oversight, and modernity. Russell et al. (2015) turn their ethnographic eyes to novel machinations by Philip Morris aimed at undermining the FCTC and, in turn, responses by global health diplomats. They show how, in national capitals of the Global South, FCTC Conference of the Parties meetings can serve
as a bulwark against new Big Tobacco machinations, allowing the parties to revivify their commitments to overcome any politics of resignation. Back in Philip Morris’s North American roost, Griffith (2009) analyzes how mechanisms of a moral economy can continually morph to undergird US tobacco cultivation. He shows that, as North Carolina farmers have faced new corporatization and public health censure, they have tried to play up novel moral framings for their tobacco cultivation, like fortifying citizens who contribute in positive ways to society.

Studying films and videos bankrolled by Big Tobacco, Otañez & Glantz (2009) add anthropological ballast to a growing literature on corporate campaigns combining social responsibility, public outreach, and branding. They illustrate that anthropologists are especially well poised to decipher the nuances and potency of keywords and symbols in these campaigns, such as nostalgia around barns and agrarian landscapes. In their work, we see intersections between the critical study of tobacco agriculture, moral economies, and health risks and broader, critical anthropologies of development, sustainability, rural change, and environmental health. Their work lays bare the vast, untapped opportunities for anthropologists to compare tobacco corporate activity with what is happening in other industries, for example, food, chemicals, and petroleum (Otañez & Glantz 2009).

In his recent publications, Kohrman prods audiences in and outside the academy to further problematize research perspectives that reinforce rhetorics of consumer sovereignty, and he encourages us to think more critically about what kinds of understudied labor have gone into sustaining cigarette manufacturing. For instance, in his article, “Cloaks and Veils: Countervisualizing Cigarette Factories In and Outside of China,” Kohrman (2015) details how people inside government, public health, and industry around the world have been producing optics that shroud key nodes in cigarette supply chains and instead foreground smokers’ behaviors. In “Curating Employee Ethics: Self-Glory Amid Slow Violence at the China Tobacco Museum,” Kohrman (2017) takes us on a stroll through a Shanghai museum to reveal how, in a time of increasing condemnation of Big Tobacco, the industry has striven in one major cigarette-producing country to generate an ethics of self-worth and compliance among its managers. In “Unmasking Gendered Materialism,” he traces uncanny ways that past work to fabricate cigarettes with filter tips has influenced contemporary politics regarding air pollution and gender, involving new ethical wrangles regarding what it means to be human in a time of heightened anxiety over aerosolized ruination (Kohrman 2020). And in the newly released volume Poisonous Pandas: Chinese Cigarette Manufacturing in Critical Historical Perspectives, Kohrman and an interdisciplinary group of scholars (2018) offer novel portraits of people—government leaders, scientists, tax officials, artists, and soldiers—who, starting in the 1930s, experimentally revamped China’s pre-Communist cigarette industry and fitfully expanded its political, economic, and cultural influence into the new millennium, diluting tobacco-prevention programs at every turn. These portraits not only cut against the grain of what contemporary tobacco scholars typically study. They also throw open vitally important new windows for understanding how harms wrought by tobacco exposure continue to proliferate around the world, even as smoking rates decline in contexts enjoyed by the wealthy and well educated.

CONCLUSION

We remain optimistic that, in the years ahead, more anthropologists will contribute to this literature, framing their own windows and throwing them open onto what remains a profoundly potent and polymorphous plant. After all, tobacco, in all its multicolored packaging, histories, and hybridized varietals, resides at the obvious nexus of so many new and ongoing projects of interest to anthropologists today. As a transnational commodity, fabled pharmacon, locomotive of science
and sociality, and, no less, engine of human annihilation, labor exploitation, and environmental degradation, what better than tobacco can anthropologists turn to for problematizing everything from materialities of globalization amid industry and infrastructure to human/nonhuman relations and the Anthropocene, as well as to biopolitics, thanatopolitics, and bodily experiences?

**DISCLOSURE STATEMENT**

The authors are not aware of any affiliations, memberships, funding, or financial holdings that might be perceived as affecting the objectivity of this review.

**LITERATURE CITED**


Ryan C. 2019. *Big Tobacco is a long way from burning out.* Wall Street Journal, Dec. 6


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