



Broccoli and Desire

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Abstract: Tracing the commodity chain of broccoli from Nashville, Tennessee supermarkets to Maya farmers in highland Guatemala, this paper examines relations of desire and political economic power. We argue that the global broccoli trade is shot through with desires—desires of Western consumers to eat healthy foods as well as desires for Maya farmers to get ahead economically. Such desires simultaneously subvert and sustain the hegemonic constellations that anchor crucial nodes in the international broccoli trade.

Keywords: agriculture, desire, consumption, food, neoliberalism, Guatemala

Susan, a single, 32-year-old nurse in Nashville, Tennessee, walks through the produce aisles of her neighborhood Kroger supermarket, examining fruits and vegetables as she decides on her meals for the next few days. When she first entered the store, Susan breezed past the produce, picking up milk (skim, organic), cereal, and a few low-fat frozen dinners before returning for a more leisurely stroll through the rich colors and aromatic smells of what she considers to be the “real food”. Susan is not a vegetarian, but she explains that she often cooks without meat. Along with carrots, bananas, and a couple of types of lettuce, Susan selects a large bundle of broccoli, still wet from the misters. She may make a stir-fry, or just have it steamed—she is not yet sure.

Pablo, a married, 39-year-old Kaqchikel Maya farmer in Tecpán Guatemala, walks his fields early one morning, surveying the crops and making a mental note of where weeds are hiding. Pablo farms land that has been in his family for generations; unlike many of his neighbors, he is fortunate to have more than enough acreage to supply his family of five with maize and beans throughout the year. He has turned some of his surplus land to growing export crops—at first, snow peas, then French beans, and now broccoli. The new crops are more labor intensive and risky, but Pablo has managed to make a good profit with the broccoli. He is now considering converting more of his subsistence cropland to

broccoli production—he says he would like to make enough money to send his children to the Catholic school in town, to buy a truck, to expand his house.

The stories of Susan and Pablo call attention to the proliferation of hopes, desires, and aspirations that characterize the current age of globalized commodity chains.¹ In Susan's story, we see the sort of late-capitalist consumption toward which we may maintain a cynical distance even as we willingly and gladly participate in it. Her shopping patterns are part of a larger life project formulated around certain desires shaped in relation to market forces, cultural images, moral values, and the changing structure of the global produce trade. Susan must balance competing intentions in her alimentary consumption. She considers herself an informed customer, sympathetic to the philosophies of the fair trade and slow food movements; she tells us that she eschews Starbucks in favor of the locally owned coffee house in her neighborhood. At the same time, she works long hours and often has too little time to shop and eat the way she would like, a source of lingering guilt. Susan's life involves a different set of opportunities and investments than we find among Maya farmers in the Guatemalan highlands. Yet, her year-round supply of fresh and frozen vegetables is only possible because of the low returns and high risks that these farmers face. Comforting images hide the ugly truths of the commodity chains that bring Susan her food. Product packaging does not disclose that a large corporate dairy produces her organic milk or that poor Maya men and women grow her beautifully symmetric and vivid green broccoli.

This brings us to Pablo and other farmers living around Tecpán, a predominately Kaqchikel Maya town (population 10,000) in the Guatemalan highlands.² Tecpán has a reputation in the region as an economically affluent and politically progressive place, and in the 1990s, after Guatemala's civil war died down, Tecpán experienced a boom in nontraditional export farming. For Pablo, this has meant some extra money and a world of new risks, dangers, and uncertainties. There is much more at stake in Pablo's relationship to broccoli than Susan's, which would lead some to characterize Pablo as being driven not by "desire" but by "need". This view subtly situates need and desire in a hierarchy laden with moral and cultural assumptions (Soper 1981, 1993; cf Doyal and Gough 1991), privileging the presumptively more basic need as natural compared to ephemeral and fickle desires. While Pablo often characterizes his work as "fighting for life" (*luchando por la vida*), even his basic goals go beyond a daily struggle to survive. His circumstances are humble by North American standards, but like most other export growers he is relatively well-off by local standards; significantly, he has enough land to supply his basic subsistence needs and produce a surplus. He told us that he wants to get ahead (*superarse*) and to achieve something more or something better (*algo más*), goals he

prefers to communicate in Spanish rather than in his native Kaqchikel.

Around Tecpán, export agriculture is part of a larger picture of hopes for the future, local ideas about progress, and emergent forms of entrepreneurship and economic behavior ratcheted above the horizon of subsistence. Pablo has a stake in his heritage as a farmer and feels an obligation to carry on certain cultural traditions. He also envisions a better future for himself and his children, an unironically modern future. This future is projected with all the anticipation and anxiety that “not yet” entails—that the *algo más* he hopes for has not yet arrived, even as it remains compellingly close, close enough that he has made the risky business of export agriculture his project. Part of Pablo’s motivation aims at immediate and practical well-being. But another part is an existential desire that aims at participation and belonging in the global ecumene, at being connected (Deleuze 1992). It is about a local experience of modernity and what it means to be part of the modern world, just as Susan’s broccoli consumption is about the making of a certain modern lifestyle.³

Based on ethnographic fieldwork with Maya farmers and North American shoppers,⁴ we offer this often maligned cruciferous vegetable as an entrée to the study of globalized connections of production, consumption, and desire. We begin by presenting a theory of desire as a collective phenomenon shaped at the interface of individual intentions, local worlds, and global flows. We then connect the dots in the global flow of this commodity chain, looking beyond the hot fields and cold storage rooms to the social and existential dimensions of how broccoli matters for people. Conveying a sense of Maya farmers’ agency within a system driven by local supply and distant demand, we show how neoliberal reforms and nontraditional agriculture strengthen certain community values even as they introduce new forms of risk and inequality. The theoretical and political positioning found in studies of nontraditional agriculture tends to either critique the economic exploitation and increased risk of global capitalism or celebrate it as local resistance to the world market (Goldin 1996; Hamilton and Fischer 2003; Thrupp, Bergeron and Waters 1995; cf Carletto, de Janvry and Sadoulet 1999; Klak 1999; von Braun, Hotchkiss and Immink 1989). We too initially planned to uncover exploitation at the hither side of the commodity chain. But ethnographic engagement pushed us to see the global trade as more ambiguous, a rough patchwork of desires, interests, and investments in which expectations and opportunities are mediated by geographies of class, capital, and individual subjectivities.

Economies and Desires

Shifting from a language of need to a language of desire does not elide crucial questions of power, agency, and inequality. To say that

behavior is “driven by desire” is to say that it is “compelling” (Massumi 2002:108), that it matters deeply (Kleinman 1999, 2006), and that there is a great deal at stake. This is what Pablo and Susan have in common: both are involved in a basically human process of *desiring*, engaged in projects that seek to make and remake the world around certain values.

Deleuze and Guattari (1983, 1987), Lacan (1977), and Levinas (1969) all converge on the idea that desire comprises a basic dimension of human existence that cannot be reduced to simple need. If need can be required—one can eat to satiate hunger and one can drink to satiate thirst—desiring is an ongoing, future-oriented process. In other words, desiring is the process of making the world in which material production and the affective life of producers—their *investment* in what they are doing—are inseparable.

In contrast to the methodological individualism of neoclassical economics with its focus on “preferences” and “interests”, our view sees individual “desires” as shaped by collective experiences, cultural images, and political economic structures. Desires move individuals to take up stakes in certain activities that are compelling because they embody moral, economic, or symbolic values. As such, desires are specific to local worlds. Yet, these local worlds are themselves part of larger systems of production and trade, and through such connections consumer desires for exotic comestibles in affluent Western societies can perversely exploit the needs of distant workers and reinforce unjust workplace conditions abroad (Barndt 2002). Commodity chains act as containers in a broad sense—they route and contain products while also containing social relations that can hold in place exploitative relations or provide space for resistance (Mintz 1985; Roseberry 1996; Weiss 1996).

The concept of desire locates economic preferences not in a sovereign subject but in a local world where behavior embodies shared moral values. Why people do what they do is not simply a matter of rational decision-making and the pursuit of self-interest; it is also the outcome of cultural logics that are internalized over time (Fischer 1999, 2001). Forms of economic self-interest are themselves cultural outcomes that embody naturalized values—whether economic profit-seeking or medicalized wellness—that are not universally shared (Sayer 2004). Along the broccoli trail, we do not find disinterested actors. We find people actively investing in making themselves and the world look a certain way—to change the world or to keep it the same. At the same time, what matters to people needs to be set against the backdrop of how various forces limit frames of mind, contour public discourse, and, ultimately, define a world in which certain investments are naturalized and deemed desirable, even if, from another perspective, they are not in individuals’ own narrowly defined self-interests.

The Commodity Chain

Broccoli holds contradictory images in the US popular imagination: it is seen as a lackluster vegetable that is also an icon of health-conscious consumer culture. Low in calories, virtually fat-free, and rich in vitamin content and antioxidant properties,⁵ broccoli has become a staple within mainstream, health-conscious cuisine in the USA over the last 20 years.⁶ California farming operations still supply the lion's share of the market during their "in" season, from May to October. But supermarkets stock broccoli year-round, and in the winter months an increasing portion of their supply comes from Guatemala.⁷

The mostly Maya farmers who engage in export production around Tecpán come from an upwardly mobile rural middle class. These smallholding farmers have long grown subsistence crops to supply household needs as well as cash crops such as tomatoes and wheat for regional markets; they were quick to adopt the new nontraditional crops when they were introduced. Surveys in 2000 of 56 households in three rural hamlets of Tecpán found that 98% of households maintained subsistence *milpa* (maize and beans) plots, but that 56% also devoted at least some land to nontraditional crops (see Fischer 2004). Of the nontraditional producers, 79% grew broccoli, followed by snow peas (57%), French beans (39%), mini-zuchinis (18%), and blackberries (11%). Significantly, 78% of the farmers supplied all of their family's maize and beans subsistence needs for the year with their *milpa* land, using the earnings from nontraditional crops for cash expenditures and capital investments. As a result, the size of the landholdings of nontraditional producers (20 cuerdas or 2.3 hectares) was almost double that of the exclusively *milpa* producers. Median household landholdings were 15.8 cuerdas (1.8 hectares). In addition, since the early 1990s the number of medium-size farms in the area has increased significantly at the expense of very large and very small farms.

The production cycle for nontraditional crops grown around Tecpán is short—in the case of broccoli, less than 90 days from planting to harvest. At harvest, farmers, their families, and hired hands cut the broccoli stalks in the late morning and early afternoon, packing them into bushel-sized nylon bags or plastic boxes that look like milk crates. Packing plants and cooperatives send trucks to pick up broccoli produced under contract, but small farmers without contracts find themselves at the mercy of predatory intermediaries (*coyotes*) who buy produce at a discount on the side of the road. Because produce such as broccoli spoils so quickly and because it has virtually no value in the local subsistence market, farmers are compelled to sell their crop, giving buyers a clear advantage. Intermediaries play on the vulnerabilities of farmers, using their privileged access to market information and the farmers' need to sell to establish prices in a field of power where the rationality of choices

always touches upon the anxiety of not really being able to choose. Most farmers view them as pariahs, making money not through hard work but through the rather arbitrary good fortune of owning a pickup truck: “If you own a truck, you can make more money”, one farmer said. “But it does not mean that you work more”.

In Tecpán, the nefarious means individuals can employ to get rich quick—Faustian pacts with extra-worldly demons—is a common subject of gossip. Such stories are told about *coyotes* and their dealings. These stories speak to the sense that nontraditional agriculture is something of an anxious pursuit, enmeshed as much in emergent dangers and uncertainties as the optimism of new opportunities. It is also clear that these anxieties are not just about broccoli. One man in Tecpán, a chronically underpaid schoolteacher who does not grow nontraditional crops, told us a story he had heard about a friend of a friend, Marcos: “some coyotes, acquaintances of Marcos, were hauling a load of bagged produce in their truck when they saw a police car down the road. They pulled in at Marcos’s house and asked if they could leave their bags of broccoli until the morning. He agreed. At dawn the coyotes returned to retrieve their bags, giving Marcos 100 Quetzales [about \$13]. He protested this was far too much money, but the coyotes urged him to just keep it, to not worry about the exchange, and they left”. Looking at our clearly puzzled faces, our friend connected the dots: “It must have been marijuana. There are lots of drug dealers passing as vegetable traders. They fill their pickups with produce, but below that they put drugs, or sometimes they hollow out broccoli stems and hide the drugs inside. Because of this, they only do their business at night, when the police aren’t around, and since they are posing as broccoli merchants the police don’t suspect anything”.

Whether such stories are “factual” or not is beyond the point, although it should be noted that in the late 1980s and early 1990s the Cali cartel shipped tons of cocaine through Guatemalan produce exporters in what the DEA dubbed “the broccoli routes”. More important for us, however, such stories reveal the persistence of a moral economy based on fairness, on corporate labor over individual gains, and on modesty. This moral model intensifies at the margins of the global economy as local producers are brought into tense relations with the global marketplace, where they are not benefiting—as they are well aware—when compared to distributors and packers.

Once it reaches the export packing plants that line the Pan-American Highway between Guatemala City and Tecpán, the broccoli is weighed and classified according to size and aesthetic quality. Sanitized in warm chlorinated baths and rinsed in cool water for preservation, the produce is then packed in cartons already stamped with a US distributor’s brand logo. The packing plants truck boxes of broccoli to cool storage facilities at Guatemala City’s international airport, where they arrive between 7

and 10 o'clock at night. Loaded onto early-morning cargo flights, the produce arrives in Miami before 6 am and, if all goes smoothly, will clear customs within a few hours to be shipped to grocery distributors throughout North America. All in all, the produce usually arrives in supermarkets within 48–72 hours from the time it was cut in Guatemala. Broccoli can then last another 15 or 20 days on the shelf and in the consumer's refrigerator.

Sipping coffee and eating apple strudel at Guatemala City's upscale Café Wein, exporter Tom Heffron extols the virtues of globalization and explains its logistical advantages. He speaks to us as fellow Americans who are part of the very consumer market he is working to tap into and his pitch for export agriculture reflects this economic geography. "Any point in Guatemala is closer to Washington or New York than any point in California, so Guatemala has an advantage in the Eastern Seaboard market. Going to Miami with product is still closer than it would be from Salinas or other points in California". Heffron passionately advocates free trade, arguing that open markets for broccoli benefit everyone involved: "We are sharing the same consumer in New York with our friends in California: they need us in the winter months to keep the product in front of the consumer's eyes, and we need them in the summer months to do the same thing. Hopefully, then, we are making sure that the same consumer is fed all year round". Heffron sees himself as a bit of a liberator, a tool of the invisible hand and the miracles it can work to increase wealth and well-being; he has the self-assuredness that comes with seeing his work as promoting the larger cause of Justice through equality of opportunity for "peasant" farmers (and by disrupting entrenched, racialized oligarchic commercial interests). Heffron is not simply deploying an ideology of neoliberalism to cover over the crude self-interest of a businessman. He comes across as sincere, separating, at least in his own mind, the bad aspects of globalization from what he sees as its genuine benefits.

The reality is not so rosy, and the good and the bad are not so easily divided out. Multinational corporations control the largest packing plants and smaller exporters such as Heffron work in close association with distributors and big retailers in the United States to predict demand and ensure the supply of broccoli. Packing plants and exporters then contract out most of their production to smallholding Maya farmers, buying the remainder of the produce needed to fill demand on the open market. This is a crude but effective strategy: prices are minimized by strategically contracting for less than the anticipated demand, with the remainder purchased only as needed and at bottom-of-the-barrel prices. There are no local markets for the leftover supply since broccoli is not part of the local diet and is distasteful to the Tecpaneco palate. Once they have entered into export production farmers must play the global food game as it is structured from afar. Farmers are vulnerable to market

fluctuations predicated on consumer events abroad about which they have little information. As production has dramatically expanded in the last 20 years, and as demand has begun to flatten, packing plants have lowered prices while raising quality standards.

Increased quality standards have brought a related set of concerns to bear on highland growers. Because broccoli and other export crops are destined for foreign consumers, cosmetic quality is of paramount importance. Broccoli stems must be of a uniform length with no bruising or other deformities, and packing plants go to great lengths to ensure that each piece of produce lives up to these demands. This also means that the contracts that Maya farmers have to ensure them a market offer little security since their produce can easily be rejected at the packing plant with the vague explanation that it does not live up to quality standards. And the difference between a perfect broccoli grade and an inferior, unacceptable one is as slim as it is subjective. It is estimated that packing plants reject about 15% of broccoli based on appearance.

Obsessive cosmetic concerns do not mesh with Kaqchikel Maya farmers' culinary standards. For them, wasting food is taboo (*xajan*), a cultural norm borne of necessity and instilled in children from an early age. They find it not only odd but immoral for packing plants to let produce rot just because the color is off or the stalks are out of shape. Farmers do not want to waste good food and yet they do not have a taste for the broccoli and other export crops they grow. Maya export farmers often speak of the contradictions of producing a product that is more or less useless in their local world. It is not that exchange-value is elevated over use-value as nothing more than an expedient means to higher profits. Rather, the imperative to get rid of the product before it rots often means that profits are elusive. In this context, not being wasteful, even if it means taking a financial loss, can be an important source of moral and cultural capital for farmers.

Broccoli requires regular applications of fertilizers and pesticides, which farmers often mix haphazardly and apply with little protection for themselves. Although no medical studies have been conducted, farmers believe a number of health problems can be traced to the chemical fertilizers and pesticides they apply. Farmers report that chemical fertilizer "burns" the soils, slowly depleting them of their nutrients and thus requiring ever-larger doses. David Carey (nd) reports that Kaqchikel farmers simultaneously value chemical fertilizers for the increase in productivity they provide and lament the long-term costs they are taking on their lands and their vulnerability to price increases. He notes that an increasing number of farmers in the area are returning to organic fertilizers.

Changing forms of agricultural production in the Guatemala highlands reflect general trends in global food systems. Smallholder farming still predominates in this area, but contracting production is the new model.⁸

Food-processing corporations transcend the fray of risk and uncertainty by contracting supply along a transnational chain of intermediaries. This leads to a paradoxical convergence of intensive production techniques and reduced prices—a detrimental trend for small growers on the margins of the global economy that highlights the human, environmental, and economic costs of food and farm labor (Hughes and Reimer 2004; Thompson and Wiggins 2002). There is also a simultaneous localization and delocalization of capital as farmers shift to export markets, investing money in their own operations while also producing commodities that will be sold and generate profits in foreign markets. Consumer surpluses are generated in places like Nashville, Tennessee, where this structure allows for cheap produce year-round and where desires are cultivated with the strategic and intentional deployment of cultural images that make broccoli into an object of desire for people who want healthy food.

Supermarkets

Supermarket shopping is one of the most widely shared quotidian experiences of adults in the United States, part of the daily rhythms of urban and small-town life for all but a very elite social stratum; the average American visits a supermarket about twice a week and spends half of his or her food budget there (Food Marketing Institute 2002).⁹ In 2002 and 2003 we conducted surveys of 106 individuals in a Nashville Kroger supermarket to document their buying habits and their selection of produce, as well as interviewing in-depth a smaller sample of shoppers and the produce manager about marketing strategies and presentation. While several national supermarket chains operate in Nashville, Kroger fills the local default category of “grocery store”, blanketing the metropolitan area with its 23 stores. We focused on a Kroger in a busy commercial district of a relatively diverse upper middle class neighborhood (with an average household income in 2004 of US\$137,000, and median household income of US\$78,000).

The grocery store is a site of consumption and production, where consumptive desires meet the offerings of industrial alimentary capitalism. It does not simply respond to demand but trains demands that inform the broader agricultural market (Crang 1996:63). Shoppers enter Kroger with at least some vague expectation of what they can find there and of what they like. These expectations are mediated by popular cultural images about what is healthy, clean, a bargain, or good at “this time of year”. In the neighborhood where we researched, few shoppers were concerned with the practical limitations of “making ends meet” (Lunt and Livingstone 1992:89), but almost all surveyed said that they are keenly aware of pricing, notice fluctuations, and believe that what they pay at Kroger is a “good deal”, especially compared to the

nearby Wild Oats Market, with its higher prices and presumably higher quality. Yet, even at Kroger, shoppers constantly define “quality” on the fly as they move about the store examining products. All the shoppers we interviewed spoke about broccoli in terms of appearance, focusing on freshness, ripeness, color, texture, and consistency. It should be dark green as well as seductive in its size and buoyancy, buds flowering out and around the stalk like a mushroom cloud. Tungsten lights enhance the aesthetics, making the produce section an enticing palate of colors, with vivid orange carrots lying alongside deep green broccoli and exotic mushrooms and lettuces (cf Freidberg 2004 on vegetable aesthetics in England and France). Kroger caters to these visual desires because “we know that our customers are looking for a good quality product”, as one manager put it.

Consumption plays into the commodification of identity and a fascination with exotic and foreign elements (Bell and Valentine 1997; Cook 1994; Delamont 1995; Kalcik 1984; Watts and Goodman 1997). A handful of shoppers told us that the misters make it seem like the produce is closer to the farm. When we told them that the broccoli was actually from Guatemala they were not surprised, aware that a large portion of their food now comes from abroad. For many, produce appeared to come from a vague agrarian setting that is delocalized and yet situated “abroad”. The global system itself thereby becomes fetishized, so much so that some shoppers told us that they prefer imported produce because, as one man put it, “big farms in California use too many pesticides and chemicals”. Again, this misses the fact that Guatemalan producers also use chemicals and that pesticide applications are one of the main challenges that they face, *not* a clear advantage vis-à-vis larger California operations. Cook and Crang (1996) point to the “double commodity fetish” of foodstuffs: an ignorance of the origin and conditions of production of the desired items combined with geographical “lore” about these origins (Cook 1994; Guthman 2003). In the case of broccoli, we found that for a number of shoppers the “lore” of broccoli from Guatemala romanticizes offshore production as small scale, not part of an industrialized food chain, and, as Goldfrank (2005) found for Chilean produce, see it as potentially cleaner as a result.

The rise of broccoli consumption in the US is also linked to the image of “health foods”, which is just as generalized and subjective as “quality”. Almost all of the shoppers told us that they eat broccoli because they want to “be healthier”, “stay in shape”, “make healthy food for their families”, and “live right”. They could easily rattle off at least one or two positive attributes about broccoli—its vitamins and antioxidants most often. In this way, broccoli is part of a lifestyle production driven by various kinds of ethical and medical pursuits related to the bourgeois virtues of healthy eating and healthy living (Barnett et al 2005). But the shoppers we surveyed were not intensely critical

about industrial foods to the extent that they had a detailed understanding of commodity chains, structures of production, and differences across products. Rather, they worked with vaguer senses of what quality means, with broccoli symbolic of that generalized value. They registered ethical reflections about wanting to eat clean food and to support small-scale producers, and yet they were not aware of exactly how broccoli gets produced and marketed. Ultimately, we found a shared moral model of broccoli—a pattern of reasoning about why it is good or bad—that centered on a desire for “something better” in terms of health, nutrition, and lifestyle.

Morals and Desires

For most of the Maya export farmers we interviewed, broccoli production fits into a morality of traditional forms of agriculture. Most Maya families in Tecpán plant plots of maize and beans (*milpa*) which will supply at least part of their families’ subsistence needs. Maize is the staple of virtually all meals, and holds religious as well as material significance. Yet, since the 1990s, *milpa* has been increasingly supplanted on the prime lands around town by broccoli and other export produce.

Broccoli farmers told us that new export crops provide a way to earn some extra cash while also retaining control over the means of production. Land holds powerful affective meanings for most Tecpaneco farmers, as a link to their ancestors, a source of spiritual and material sustenance, and as a means for self-determination. For many, the shift to nontraditional crops has been an economic boon, allowing them to expand their land holdings at the expense of large ladino plantations. Despite recognizing the considerable market risks, most Maya farmers see this as a positive alternative strategy.

In household surveys conducted in Tecpán and neighboring communities in 1998 and 2000 ($n=211$), 57.3% of sampled farmers saw their economic condition as becoming “better” or “much better” after the introduction of non-traditional crops. An additional 36.5% of respondents said that there had been no change in their economic circumstances, with many reporting that they nonetheless saw the introduction of new crops as a positive development in that it provides an additional market outlet. Only 6.2% of the farmers surveyed reported their condition to be “worse” or “much worse” following the introduction of non-traditional crops (see Hamilton and Fischer 2003).

Yet Maya farmers lament export crops’ demanding labor requirements, they express frustration with the involved quality control procedures, and they worry about the risks of crop failure. The new export crops require much more labor than *milpa* and, thus, as one man put it, “you work hard, it’s very hard. You spend more time in the fields

and you need knowledge in this business”. There is the lure of material gain, but there is also, at least for this man, a claim to a changing sense of pride and skill. Export producers distinguish themselves from traditional farmers. They see themselves as more skilled and enjoy the symbolic capital of being part of the larger world system. Farmers we interviewed often bragged about shipping produce from their fields to the US, which they called the “biggest” and the “best” market in the world.

Some farmers also see export agriculture as a way to maintain and strengthen family values and the traditional life of the farm. As one Tecpaneco stated:

These new crops involve the whole family, just like the *milpa*. It’s not just the man that works in the field; the wife works, the kids work, everybody pitches in, which is to say it’s communal labor. This is the way we [Maya] work, by doing things together. It provides unity. Let’s take the case of broccoli. When it’s harvest time, the parents, the kids, the aunts and uncles, the cousins and nephews—everybody—turns out to help harvest. This is the most important thing.

In this local world, efficiency is not the most important concern. There are complicated social and moral processes at work that are not captured in a narrow cost–benefit analysis. Value accrues specificity in this case as export farming converges with moral models involving family relationships, economic autonomy, and ownership and is, at the same time, seen as an oppositional practice in relation to regional histories of maquiladora wage labor and seasonal migration, which is generally seen in Maya communities as the most odious sort of wage labor, an avenue of last resort.

The job insecurity, risk of crop failure, and price fluctuations are more than offset, most Maya farmers report, by the independence and flexibility such production allows. To work for someone else, more than one farmer told us, is a form of slavery. Retaining control of their means of production is an important gain. Rational choice theories would frame this as a simple determination based on a cost–benefit analysis. In our view, such a decision is *over-determined* by the combination of forces that are at play in the rural areas surrounding Tecpán, a combination which makes export farming a compelling alternative. We also see it as part of a larger structure of feeling linked to a *desire* for “something better”, such that it is not simply by economic calculus that Maya farmers have switched to export crops but also out of a more anxious and uncertain pursuit of surpluses.

Not all farmers are equally positioned. Some farmers have done better than others because they have better access to markets and are more attuned to new technologies. The export markets around Tecpán are “like the Wall Street of vegetables”, one trader noted, “because they determine the prices. These are ‘virtual markets’ because you don’t see

it in any one place. It's not in the plaza. It's in houses, it's in the street with cell phones; they're looking for prices, they're setting prices". When we spoke with him in 2002, Jesús Batz, from the remote village of Paquip, had just returned from New York City, where he had gone to meet with a produce importer. Batz does pretty well by local standards and with the earnings from export crops he has been able to buy a cell phone—a car phone hooked up to a battery and occupying the centerpiece of his modest dining table—that he uses to check prices in various markets and make contact with new distributors. He owns a pick-up truck and fashions himself as a well-connected rural entrepreneur. He does not find irony in the juxtaposition of the dirt floor of parts of his rural house and his electronic connection to the wider world. Able to get the best price available for his product, he is at a distinct advantage. But such connections also create emergent hierarchies on the local level, a digital divide that allows some to translate information flows into economic capital. Batz is part of an emerging middle class of entrepreneurs and he speaks brashly about the US as a land of spectacular abundance “where”, as he puts it, “only the best is consumed”.

The professionalism and entrepreneurship that Batz embodies do not jibe with popular images of the Maya as victims: he comes across as someone who is an active agent of his and his community's future. He hopes that revenues can be used to enhance the local educational and economic infrastructure and in political organizing at the regional and national levels. Batz tells us that “some producers have begun to fund Maya revitalization efforts, bilingual education, and political activities. The Maya have never really linked up economics with politics, but here in Tecpán we can because of this agriculture. Lots of producers are still interested in their culture”. Batz's sense of something better differs from that of many Maya ethnic organizations: he employs a model of privatized *economic* empowerment rather than collectivized claims and *cultural* empowerment. Ultimately, Batz speaks about a kind of community revitalization that is vitally linked to globalized structures and flows. His plans are not parochial—even if they seek to benefit his village in particular—and his economic behavior goes beyond national borders—even if his use of the term “community” (*pueblo*) refers to the Maya in general. Like other farmers, Batz feels that if consumers in the best and biggest market are consuming his products, then his products must be the best. The packing plant that Batz sells to uses terms like “Exotic” and “Producto de Guatemala” on its packaging in an effort to connect directly with consumers. Then, even if customers flatten Guatemala into a generalized archipelago of offshore production, there is resonance in the simple fact that it is from somewhere else.

All of this adds up to a local experience of modernity—a Maya modernity that, while not uniformly shared, does tap into the idea of being part of the wider world and of being active in the making

of the modern world. Here we find that entrepreneurial ideas about change run together with durable feelings about traditional cultural values and, in fact, cultural values are strategically deployed as a way to enhance business. Farmers are not yet marketing their produce as “Maya grown” but the idea is starting to take hold and this would be a new deployment of strategically essentialized culture in the produce market. In this way, we find a mutually constitutive process in which people like Batz simultaneously identify as global and local, cosmopolitan and indigenous. It is not that modernity is opposed to tradition, then, but that tradition is itself objectified and talked about as a strategy to bring about change and reaffirm core moral values.

Batz’s operation is a good example of how compelling the trade is, even during tough times. Batz has been committed to export agriculture for more than a decade. He has devoted resources and energy to it. He has been forced to accept and endure risks involved. Prices began dropping in the summer of 2001, he told us.

There was more competition. Then, after September 11, we could not sell because the market was saturated and we lost our connections with New York City because of problems at the airport and customs. The demand in the United States dropped. If there were risks with these products a year ago, now there are too many risks.

But despite this downward trend, Batz insists that he will continue to grow export crops. If anything, the price drop intensified his desires to export. At once optimistic and sarcastic, he told us that the market cannot go anywhere but up. The price crisis pushed some of his neighbors out of the business. But Batz is now working harder than ever to strengthen cooperative associations with other farmers in order to create a buffer against future crises.

Ultimately, the main challenge facing broccoli farmers is a dilemma of control. Farmers retain the means of production but they are dependent on exporters for market access. They must produce a crop that satisfies not only their own emerging senses of pride but also conforms to the aesthetic and quality standards of fickle consumers. Farmers are aware of the economic inequalities that make their life chances different from those of the broccoli consumer. They seek a more expansive and inclusive marketplace, which might involve cooperatives at the local level or improved structures of control at the global level. For most, their savings are tied up in crops—the dried corn in the crib, the wheat or broccoli in the fields—and crop failure can easily bankrupt a household. For many farmers, devoting all of one’s land to nontraditional crops might actually provide more effective opportunities for getting ahead. Yet, the key cited by most farmers is to balance nontraditional with subsistence production, simultaneously engaging the world market and maintaining the family’s land. When asked about their vision of the future, many farmers insist

that their children will maintain the land and will themselves be farmers. But most also speak of sending their children to school, having them get an education so that they may do “more in life”, such as becoming a schoolteacher or opening a store. Thus, to say that farmers are motivated by *desire* is to emphasize that their decisions are based on a compelling experience of modernity that links economic behavior to cultural values, moral models, and hopes for the future.

Returns to Desire

We juxtaposed the vignettes of the grocery shopper and the export farmer at the start of this article in order to get away from the antinomy of need versus desire that often polarizes our view of the global economy. Our point is to show that the lives of Pablo and Susan are interdependent and mutually constituted even as they are differently positioned in relation to the global economy and what they stand to gain or lose. These are real individuals but our interest is also how they can function as sociological “ideal types”, stand-ins for a poor Maya farmer and a middle-class American consumer. To conceive of southern producers and northern consumers as part of a system of mutual dependency is to resist the urge to reproduce the simple lopsided equation of southern need versus northern desire.

Desire and the valuation of “something better” have long operated as a structure of feeling in the Maya highlands, a sort of “vernacular modernity” (Knauff 2002; cf Appadurai 1996; Briggs 2001; Ferguson 1999). But in this era of neoliberalism, economic behaviour—such as export agriculture—is now also embedded in the postwar peace process. “Things are better now”, it is said by many, “not like before”—a “before” understood to be *la situación*, *la violencia*, the war of the 1980s, the genocidal baseline for now measuring “normalcy”. Export agriculture is compelling precisely because “something better” embodies senses of democratic promise and economic empowerment, and yet also arises out of an acute history of state-sponsored violence and social suffering. Tecpán is more affluent than most Maya towns, but it shares the basic conditions of discrimination and structural violence that characterize the Maya areas in general. It is true that in “postwar” Guatemala average Maya incomes and education levels have risen steadily. Emergent forms of life in Guatemala still involve violence and social suffering, but because this is not “war” there is the impression that the postwar phase has delivered the “something better” promised for so long.

That folks across the highlands now widely report that they are aspiring to “something better”—in, for example, export agriculture—should give pause to any argument that this *algo más* has finally arrived. One of the unpleasant ironies of our time is that as living conditions improve, so too are collective and individual desires motivated along

vectors that perpetuate underlying structures of exploitation and deepen inequalities across social classes and geographical territories. It is in this context that export agriculture is compelling. It is not simply an economic strategy that aims at survival amidst impoverished conditions but a political and moral orientation that actively seeks to make a world that has long promised something better, if only at the individual level. One way that this differs from earlier and ongoing efforts at Maya cultural activism is that “better” is partly privatized and made into a matter of familial success and achievement, reflecting the general tenor of neoliberal theories and models worldwide. Yet some Maya farmers see linkages between export agriculture and broader experiments at the community level, expanding social solidarity in the face of increasing privatization.

There is a danger here in representing Maya farmers as simply adapting to and coopting market forces that are ultimately driven by US consumers. Our argument is that farmers such as Pablo and consumers such as Susan are mutually constituted as subjects through the process of desire enacted in material chains of production and consumption. This position forces us to reject the microeconomic premise of consumer sovereignty and to question macroeconomic assumptions of trade and dependency. Where consumers and producers see themselves as directly connected and mutually dependent, they become empowered to enact change on their own terms rather than having to work within the foreshortened alternatives mediated by commercial interests. If we as consumers see “our” desiring as interlaced with “their” desiring then the notion of rational economic behavior as natural, neutral, and universal breaks down and we may see the commodity chain as operating on an “ethical plateau” in which decisions arise *between* different worlds (Fischer 2003).

Economic power and risk as presently distributed across the broccoli trade—between farmers, middlemen, exporters, food conglomerates, and consumers—does not equate with the real interdependence of actors. On both ends of the commodity chain, desires for something better appear ever elusive. The powerful cultural image of *algo más* may be thought of as a *dual structure of feeling*. It is at once an ideology and a lived and felt reality. Its ideological force, in fact, has precisely to do with the fact that the something better of *algo más* really matters for broccoli growers and consumers alike. In the Guatemalan highlands, impoverished living conditions, histories of violence and warfare, the felt power of desperation and urgency, and emerging feelings of modernity combine such that desiring is not totally distinct from needing, such that “something better” becomes compelling and intractable in a setting of ongoing social suffering and violent acts (Fischer and Benson 2005). If Maya farmers are exploited, it is not simply at the level of wages or prices, but more profoundly at the level of desiring, maintaining their existential

investment integral to the normative operation of the broccoli trade. On the consumption side, many broccoli eaters internalize models of healthy living and eating and are compelled—they say *need*—to eat vegetables in pursuit of cultural aspirations for wellness. Yet, like the *algo más* that never arrives in Tecpán, these desires are never fully requited because the increasing consumer surpluses of cheap food year-round do not offset diminishing levels of satisfaction and happiness (the so-called “malaise of the American middle-class” grounded in an ongoing reality of dissatisfaction and imperfectability; see Storper 2000).

Desiring is ubiquitous across the commodity chain, although its meaning and force vary. Desire is the condition of possibility for the broccoli trade. It mobilizes energies and makes producers *and* consumers into reflexive agents who monitor their own practices and comport themselves to the opportunities and risks that blossom out of this seemingly innocuous vegetable. By coming to understand the lives of broccoli farmers and eaters, we may achieve a pragmatic view of the food chain, realizing a convergence of desires around investments in “something better”. Such a viewpoint leads to a more complicated way of operating upon global connections, including both *localization* strategies (shifts to more localized markets) and *globalization* strategies (elaborations of ethical and political connections between unknowing consumers and producers). Either way, broccoli is revalued not in terms of mutual needs but with a greater appreciation of collectivized desires that are already the basis of the operation of this global flow.

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Endnotes

¹ Comaroff and Comaroff (2000:298) point to the rise of “desire and expectation on a global scale” characteristic of late capitalism; on how this links to consumption, see Friedman (1994, 2002), Stewart (1988, 2000), Tsing (2000, 2005), and the contributions to Ong and Collier (2005).

² For more background on Tecpán, see Benson (2004), Fischer (2001), Fischer and Hendrickson (2002), and Hendrickson (1995).

³ On how images and ideals condition consumer desires, see Chibnik (2003), Freidberg (2004), Roseberry (1996), and Weiss (1996); on modernity and belonging in late capitalist societies, see Appadurai (1996), Knauff (2002), and Trouillot (2003); our discussion of universality and modernity draws on Spivak (1999) and Tsing (2005).

⁴ We draw on in-depth interviews with Maya farmers as well as interviews and surveys among shoppers in the produce section at a Nashville, Tennessee Kroger supermarket. Fischer began collecting data on nontraditional agriculture in the 1990s. Benson and Fischer began collaborating on the current project in 2000, carrying out joint research

in Tecpán in the summers from 2001 to 2004; surveys and ethnographic observation in the Nashville Kroger were conducted over several months in fall 2002 and spring 2003.

⁵ For more on broccoli, see Fahey (2003). In addition to providing high levels of vitamin C, vitamin A, potassium, calcium, and fiber, studies have also found that broccoli's phytochemical sulforaphane is an effective antibacterial against *Helicobacter pylori*, which is linked to stomach ulcers and cancer. Another phytochemical, indole carbinol, also found in broccoli, is associated with a reduced risk of breast tumors. Broccoli has similarly been claimed to help prevent or treat hypertension, osteoporosis, obesity, diabetes—even cataracts and strokes. Brassica Protection Products (<http://www.brassica.com>) is currently conducting clinical trials on dietary supplements and pharmaceuticals derived from broccoli.

⁶ US households consumed well over 2 billion pounds of broccoli in 2000, or about 8 pounds per capita, putting it in the same category of produce sales as green peas, cucumbers, and celery. This is an increase of over 300% since 1980, part of a larger trend in Western countries of consuming more fresh vegetables (Friedman 1994).

⁷ In 2000, Guatemala exported about 60 million pounds of cut broccoli to the United States, up more than 900% over the previous 20 years, and most of this was grown by smallholding Maya farmers in the region around Tecpán. See Klak (1999), McCracken (1992), and Thrupp, Bergeron and Waters (1995) on Guatemala's role in the global vegetable trade.

⁸ For a detailed discussion of contract agriculture in the United States and its implications vis-à-vis the globalization of food systems, see Benson (2007); for more on labor contracts and export crops in Latin America, see Collins and Krippner (1999).

⁹ For comparison, see Mayol (1998:101–113) on supermarkets in France; Miller (1998:15–52) on supermarkets in London; and Freidberg (2004) on a comparison of French and British produce aesthetics.

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