

# 1 Agency and Constraint, Perceptions and Practice. A Theoretical Position

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## **Introduction**

Over the past fifteen years, sociologists and anthropologists at Wageningen have undertaken a wide range of empirical projects using methods of social research that centre upon an actor-oriented and interface analysis of rural development. The following dimensions have been at the forefront of this actor-oriented endeavour: the elucidation of actors' differential perceptions and practices; the interlocking of emergent forms of social agency and constraint; processes of political negotiation, accommodation and institutional regulation; a rethinking of issues of commoditization and the social attribution of 'value'; the analysis of models and practices of intervention; exploration of issues of power and authority; and the interface between science-based knowledge and technology, and forms of local knowledge (Long and Long 1992). We are presently applying similar theoretical and methodological concerns to the study of globalization and localization in contrasting rural contexts (Long 1996).

Such an approach is founded upon a sociology of rural development that aims to go beyond generalized theories or models of agrarian transformation propelled by market integration, institutional incorporation, and state or international intervention. While the shortcomings of these earlier generic models – especially their failure to explain adequately the sources and dynamics of heterogeneity in agrarian structures – are now widely recognized by political economists and sociologists alike, much research in fact remains focused on how national and international institutional and economic orders and discourses *condition* the parameters and possibilities of rural development, rather than on an analysis of the complex interplay of global/local relationships and representations in the making of rural development. For example, globalization theories addressing the 'declining coherence of national (agricultural and food) economies and national regulatory states' (Buttel 1994, p. 14), situate analytically the restructuring of rural areas within the framework of globalized capitalist 'regimes of accumulation' and 'modes of regulation.'<sup>1</sup> Although such analysis treats modes of regulation as essentially the product of past and present social struggles (Jessop 1988, p. 151) – and thus to a degree acknowledges the

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role of human agency – the principal protagonists of these struggles are depicted as macro-actors in the form of state systems and transnational corporations.

Such macro formulations narrow the focus to privilege analytically the politico-economic institutional structures of agro-food systems, rather than starting from the problematic of producing, making a living, consuming, and maintaining and transforming networks of social relations and cultural identities, both within and beyond the countryside. That is, we must address the problems of how, in differing historical and cultural contexts, rural development interventions and livelihoods are materialized and socially constructed through the interplay, contestation and negotiation of values and interests within specific domains and arenas of social action. Fundamental to this is the view that rural development is composed of a complex series of interlocking practices that are forged through the encounters, struggles and negotiations of different social actors – local farmers, traders, government officials and front-line workers, transnational company managers, politicians, agricultural scientists, and others, who people the networks and normative orders of particular regimes of accumulation and modes of regulation. Each actor (individual or collective) commands different types and scales of resources, interests, values and institutional capacities. Hence the field of rural development is constituted of social meanings and practices that are negotiated in the encounters that take place. Such practices and their outcomes are not predetermined by local cultural, ecological or organizational endowments, nor by wider economic, political, and institutional forces.

Rural development is, then, a heterogeneous process involving multiple levels, values and 'realities' – ranging from diverse local patterns of organization and management of resources, to regional economic, political and cultural phenomena, intervening state and non-state institutions, development programmes and representations, and global market, political and cultural scenarios. At the core lie central issues concerning livelihoods, organizational capacities and discourses, and intervention practice and ideology. In short, it is a complex drama about human needs and desires, organizing capabilities, power relations, skills and knowledge, authoritative discourses and institutions, and the clash of different ways of ordering and transforming the world.

The challenge of this perspective on rural development is to develop a methodology and analytical framework<sup>2</sup> that allows us to elucidate and analyse the construction of these complex discursive and social forms. A major focus of my own work since the early 1980s has been concerned with developing an actor-oriented framework for looking at these complexities. This chapter continues this task, first, by laying out in summary points the main features of the approach; second, by discussing a number of analytical concepts and issues that require further elucidation and clarification; and finally, by providing a brief account of two types of

research currently being undertaken in Wageningen from an actor perspective aimed at exploring the implications of global/local processes among rural populations.

### **Cornerstones of an Actor-oriented Approach**

An actor-oriented approach entails:

- 1 basing investigations and analysis on actor-defined issues or 'critical events';
- 2 identifying the actors<sup>3</sup> relevant to the specific arenas of action and contestation;
- 3 documenting ethnographically the situated social practices of actors and the ways in which their actions are materialized in the deployment of technologies, resources, discourses and texts (e.g., in the form of formal documents, decisions, or normative frames);
- 4 giving attention to the social networks, distributions of meanings and social constructions of value generated in the different arenas/situations;
- 5 focusing upon the organizing and ordering processes relevant to different arenas and institutional domains;
- 6 delineating the critical interfaces<sup>4</sup> that depict the points of contradiction or discontinuity between different (and often incompatible) actors' lifeworlds, including here not only so-called 'local' or 'target' groups but also 'intervening' institutional actors and other stakeholders;
- 7 elucidating the processes of knowledge/power construction entailed in these arenas and interfaces of contestation and negotiation, giving specific attention to the reconfiguration of relationships and values;
- 8 considering how matters of scale and complexity<sup>5</sup> relate to differential definitions of problematic situations and critical events and how these definitions shape specific organizing strategies of the parties involved;
- 9 identifying analytically the discursive and practical underpinnings of newly emergent social forms and connectivities.

### **Actors' Perceptions and Representations**

The approach begins with actor-defined issues or critical events, in this case relevant to the field of development, whether defined by policy makers, researchers, intervening private or public agents or local actors, and whatever the spatial, cultural, institutional and power domains and arenas implicated. Such issues or events are, of course, often perceived, and their implications interpreted, very differently by the various parties/actors involved. Hence, from the outset one faces the dilemma of

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how to represent problematic situations when there are multiple voices and contested 'realities.' A field of development is of course discursively constructed and delimited practically by the language use and strategic actions of the various actors. How far consensus is achieved over the definition of such a field or arena of contestation requires empirical evidence. One should not assume a shared vision. Actors must work towards such a common interpretation and there are always possibilities for dissenting from it.<sup>6</sup>

It is assumed that all actors work – mostly implicitly rather than explicitly – with beliefs about agency, that is, they articulate notions about relevant acting units and the kinds of knowledgeable and capability they have *vis-à-vis* the world they live in. This raises the question of how people's perceptions of the actions and agency of others shape their own behaviour. For example, local farmers may have reified views about 'the state' or 'the market' as actors, which, irrespective of their dealings with individual government officials or market traders, may influence their expectations of the outcomes of particular interventions. The same applies to the attribution of motives to local actors, such as political bosses and village authorities. The issue is how actors struggle to give meaning to their experiences through an array of representations, images, cognitive understandings, and emotional responses. Though the repertoire of 'sense-making' filters and antennae will vary considerably, such processes are to a degree framed by 'shared' cultural perceptions, which are subject to reconstitution or transformation. Locally situated cultures are always, as it were, 'put to the test' as they encounter the less familiar or the strange. An actor analysis must therefore address itself to the intricacies and dynamics of relations between differing lifeworlds and to processes of cultural construction. In this way one aims to understand the production of heterogeneous cultural phenomena and the outcomes of interaction between different representational and discursive domains, thus mapping out what we might describe as a cartography of cultural difference, power and authority.

But, since social life is composed of multiple realities, which are, as it were, constructed and confirmed primarily through experience, this interest in culture must be grounded methodologically in the detailed study of everyday life, in which actors seek to grapple cognitively and organizationally with the problematic situations they face. Hence social perceptions, values and classifications must be analysed in relation to interlocking experiences and social practices, not at the level of general cultural schema or value abstractions. For example, the production of commodities for global markets implies a whole range of value transformations, not only in regard to the commodity chain itself (i.e., the analysis of 'added value' at the points of product transformation, commercialization and consumption) but also in terms of how such commoditization impacts on the social values attributed to other goods, relationships,

livelihood activities, and forms of knowledge. In this way involvement in commodity chains may set off (but not determine) a number of significant cultural transformations.

In order to analyse these dimensions we must reject a homogeneous or unitary concept of 'culture' (often implied when labelling certain behaviour and sentiments as 'tradition') and embrace theoretically the central issues of cultural repertoires, heterogeneity and 'hybridity.' The concept of cultural repertoire points to the ways in which various cultural ingredients (value notions, types and fragments of discourses, organizational ideas, symbols and ritualized procedures) are used and recombined in social practice, consciously or otherwise; heterogeneity points to the generation and co-existence of multiple social forms within the same context or same scenario of problem solving which offer alternative solutions to similar problems, thus underlining that living cultures are necessarily multiple in the way in which they are enacted (cf. the concept of polymorphic structures in the biological sciences<sup>7</sup>); and hybridity to the mixed end-products that arise out of the combining of different cultural ingredients and repertoires. Of course there are certain inherent difficulties in the use of the term 'hybridity' to characterize contemporary patterns of change since, like *bricolage*, it suggests the sticking together or strategic combining of cultural fragments rather than the active self-transforming nature of socio-cultural practice. In a recent, deliberately provocative, paper Arce and I have suggested instead the term 'social mutation' for such internally generated and transforming processes (Arce and Long 1995).

### **Social Domains and Arenas: The Question of Constraints**

In order to get to grips with encounters between lifeworlds, we need to develop a methodological approach to the study of domains and arenas in which contestation over values and resources takes place. Here I use 'domains' to identify areas of social life that are organized by reference to a series of interlocking practices and values which, even if they are not perceived in exactly the same way by everybody, are nevertheless recognized as a locus of certain 'rules,' norms and values implying degrees of social commitment, often with some spatial markers (see Villarreal 1994, pp. 58-63, 221). Examples include the domains of family, market, state, community, production and consumption, although, depending upon the situation, particular domains will differ in their prominence, pervasiveness or social significance. In this way 'domains' are central to understanding how social ordering works, and to analyzing how social and symbolic boundaries are created and defended. The values and interests associated with particular domains become especially visible and defined at points where domains are seen to impinge on each other or come into conflict.

Hence, domains together with the notion of arena – and how they are bounded – give us an analytical handle on the kinds of constraints and enabling elements that shape actors' choices and room for manoeuvre. Domains should *not* be conceptualized *a priori* as cultural givens but as produced and transformed through the experiences shared and the struggles that take place between actors of various sorts. Like the notion of 'symbolic boundaries' enunciated by Cohen (1987, p. 16) domains represent for people some shared values that 'absolves them from the need to explain themselves to each other – [but] leaves them free to attach their own meanings to them.'

'Arenas' are social encounters or a series of situations in which contests over issues, resources, values, and representations take place. That is, they are social and spatial locations where actors confront each other, mobilize social relations and deploy discursive and cultural means for the attainment of specific ends, including that of perhaps simply remaining in the game. In the process actors may draw on particular domains to support their interests, aims and dispositions. Arenas therefore are either spaces in which contestation associated with different practices and values of different domains takes place or they are spaces within a single domain where attempts are made to resolve discrepancies in value interpretations and incompatibilities between actor interests.

The concept of arena is especially important for identifying the actors and mapping out the issues, resources and discourses entailed in particular situations of disagreement or dispute. While the idea of 'arena' has an affinity to that of 'forum,' the latter carries with it the implication that the rules for debate are, in a sense, already agreed upon, whereas contestation in an arena usually denotes discontinuities of values, norms and practices. Arena is an especially useful notion when analyzing development projects and programmes since intervention processes consist of a complex set of interlocking arenas of struggle, each characterized by specific constraints and possibilities of manoeuvre (see Elwert and Bier-schenk 1988).

While in general parlance the idea of an arena conjures up the picture of a fight or struggle taking place in some clearly demarcated and localized setting, we should not, on this basis, assume that an actor analysis is primarily interested in face-to face confrontations or interactions or only in local situations, interests, values and contests. Quite the opposite, since we are also interested in exploring how 'external' or geographically distant actors, contexts and institutional frames shape social processes, strategies and actions in localized settings. Moreover, local situations, struggles or networks are often stretched out or projected spatially as well as temporally to connect up with other distant, unknown – and sometimes unknowable – social worlds. Very few social arenas in fact are self-contained and separate from other arenas. Here the impact of modern communication and information technologies has been crucial, since these

allow for spontaneous, technology-mediated interactions of global proportions, thereby underlining the importance of developing analyses of interlocking arenas that go beyond earlier territorialized conceptions of social space based, for example, on 'rural-urban,' 'centre-periphery,' or 'nation-international order' dichotomies.

### **From Social Drama to Critical Event Analysis**

We are currently working on extending these ideas of domain and arena to the study of critical events and issues. A useful forerunner of critical event analysis, which involves the understanding of complex interlocking arenas, is the early work of Turner on 'social dramas.' Turner first developed the notion of social drama for the analysis of social conflict and dispute settlement in African village politics. Later it was applied to a wide range of other types of dramatic situations, from struggles between trade unions and mine management to clashes between town and village lifestyles and values, to larger scale disruptions in socio-political arrangements. And it can also fruitfully be applied to the understanding of critical events entailed in so-called 'natural' and 'man-made' disasters.

A central aspect of Turner's original use of social drama is the disruption of an existing set of social relations or breach of norms which occasions efforts to repair the damage and restore social order or institute some new, negotiated social arrangements. As Turner graphically puts it, focusing upon social dramas makes transparent 'the crucial principles of social structure in their operation, and their relative dominance at successive points in time.' (Turner 1957, p. 93). This enables one to analyse the realignments in power relations consequent upon the struggles that take place between specific individuals and groups. (ibid, p. 131). Adopting an interactionist methodology, he focuses upon studying the set of ongoing relationships and situations involving the actors involved in the conflict and its mode of resolution. In his way he limits his study to localized issues pertaining to contests over 'traditional' village headmanship and does not feel the need to explore much the broader implications.

The study of social dramas that are more complex in scale and ramifications can best be looked at using a similar approach, but one which must necessarily go beyond the scope of an interactionist methodology.<sup>8</sup> This is evident, for example, when we attempt to analyse social dramas such as the 1994 Zapatista uprising in Chiapas, Southern Mexico, and its aftermath, where information technology such as E-mail and Skylink were used to propagate Zapatista views, to win wider national and international support and to influence the negotiations taking place between Zapatista leaders and government spokesmen. This drama, which is now in its fourth year, also generated a series of other dramas involving struggles in other social sectors of the Mexican population for better political represen-

tation, or aimed at countering the detrimental effects of neoliberal policies<sup>9</sup>. The use of the Internet links together many spatially dispersed actors through the mediation of computer technology. They may never meet face-to-face but they constitute 'virtual communities' that clearly exert influence on their members and play an increasingly crucial role in the definition, representation and symbolization of critical events. International news correspondents, who immediately descended upon Chiapas, and their network of colleagues via portable satellite connections throughout the world, played an important role in profiling the conflict, and developed ploys to keep the story on the front pages. One intriguing case of this was the craze for Zapatista paraphernalia that erupted: They began writing about Zapatista dolls, pens, T-shirts and other souvenirs. It is said that it was the correspondent for the Spanish daily *La Vanguardia* who had suggested to an Indian street hawker selling traditionally dressed dolls to produce special Zapatista dolls. Two days later the hawker turned up with the new merchandise, complete with black ski masks like the Zapatista guerrillas themselves! (Oppenheimer 1996, pp. 29–30). Soon the wearing of the black mask itself took on a wider comico-political significance throughout Mexico as a general, unspoken symbol of protest against government.

Another instructive critical event concerns the explosion at the Union Carbide chemical plant in Bhopal, India, in 1984, which affected many thousands of people who had nothing to do with the industry or the Union Carbide company directly, and who received none of the industry's benefits. The explosion and what followed over the short and longer term enrolled a whole range of actors – spanning local, national and international arenas around several normative and moral domains and issues that the disaster brought to the fore, such as concerns over the rights of the local labour force, environmental effects, quality control standards, the freedom of transnationals to flout national and international agreements, the allocation of blame and accountability, rights and levels of compensation for affected workers and town and village residents, and a host of political ramifications that put the Indian state, regional government, international bodies, Union Carbide, and the legal profession all, as it were, 'on trial.' In an interesting analysis of the Bhopal disaster, Das (1995) highlights the dynamic interplay of bureaucratic, scientific and judicial discourses and images around the symbolization of pain, victimization, healing and compensation.

As Das argues, this type of social drama can be described as a 'critical event' because people were seriously confronted with the limitations of the set of existing institutions and practices available for dealing with the many problems it raised. Such events are often the result of institutional breakdowns, administrative impotence and/or a lack of political will to manage problematic or critical situations such as famine, rapid degrada-



tion of resources, and political conflicts that result in the dismantling of the state and civil orders.

### The Issue of 'Collective Actors'

Starting with actors' problematic or critical livelihood situations leads to a consideration of the ways in which they develop social strategies to cope with them. These situated practices involve the management and coordination of sets of social relations that carry with them various normative expectations and commitments, as well as the deployment of technologies, resources, discourses, and texts in the form of documents that likewise embody wider sets of meanings and social relations.<sup>10</sup> Also, as I indicated earlier, they frequently draw upon certain so-called 'collective' resources and symbols.

The designation 'collective actor' covers three distinct connotations, each relevant to the understanding of social practice. The first sense is that of a coalition of actors who, at least at a given moment, share some common definition of the situation, or goals, interests, or values, and who agree, tacitly or explicitly, to pursue certain courses of social action. Such a social actor or entity (e.g., networks of actors or some sort of enterprise) can meaningfully be attributed with the power of agency, that is the capacity to process experience, make decisions and to act upon them. These collective actors may be informally or formally constituted and spontaneously or strategically organized. Furthermore, as Adams (1975) has argued, such operating units fall, broadly speaking, under one of two contrasting forms: those that are characterized by a *coordinate* pattern of relations as against those that are *centralized*. In the former, there is no central figure of authority, since the individuals grant reciprocal rights to each other, while retaining the prerogative to withdraw from the particular exchange relationships at their will. Here networks are more symmetrical in form but often have ambiguous and shifting boundaries. On the other hand, in the *centralized* case, there are imbalances in the exchanges, differences in access to strategic resources, and a degree of centralized control and decision making exercised by a central body or persons (and sometimes backed by 'higher' authorities) who claim to 'represent' the collectivity in its dealings with external actors.

The second sense of collective actor (or rather *collectif*) is that of an assemblage of human, social, material, technological and textual elements that make up what Latour (1994), Callon and Law (1995) designate a heterogeneous 'actor-network.' This usage attempts to dissolve the 'commonsense' distinction between 'things' and 'people' by arguing that 'purposeful action and intentionality are not properties of objects, but neither are they properties of human actors. Rather, they are properties of institutions, of *collectifs*' (Verschoor 1997, p. 27). That is, they are emergent effects generated by the interaction of both human and non-human compo-

nents, not a group of individuals who decide to join together in some common organization. Hence attempts to define collective social action without acknowledging the constitutive role played by materials, texts and technologies fall short analytically because they assume that collective social arrangements are simply the aggregated outcome of the effective agencies and interests of the participating individuals. The merit of this second interpretation of collective, then, is twofold: it stresses the heterogeneous make-up of organizing practices founded upon enrolment strategies; and it warns against individualist/reductionist interpretations of collective forms.

The third meaning of collective actor recognizes that social life is replete with images, representations and categorizations of things, people and institutions that are assumed or pictured as somehow constituting a unitary whole. For example, earlier I drew attention to ways in which entities such as the state, the market and the community are often endowed with generalized (or collective) modes of agency, and thus shape actors' orientations and actions. But it would be wrong analytically to adopt particular actors' representations of these institutional entities as a primary grid for analyzing their interactions with these so-called collective 'others.' The principal reason for this is that representations and categorizations may form part of an understanding of social practice – namely its discursive and pictorial dimensions – but they should not be disconnected from the pragmatics and semiotics of everyday life within which they are embedded and acquire their social significance. Indeed, a major advantage of actor-oriented analysis is that it aims to problematize such conceptions and interpretations through an ethnographic study of how specific actors deal organizationally and cognitively with the problematic situations they encounter.

All three kinds of collective actor – notwithstanding the probable epistemological objections and reservations of Latour – have, I believe, a place in actor-oriented analysis.

### **Organizing Processes and Livelihoods**

Inter-individual action encompasses interaction in both face-to-face and more 'distanced' relationships. The types of social relationships range from inter-personal links based upon dyadic ties (such as patron–client relations and involvement in certain types of transactions – buyer-seller, producer-money lender, and client-ritual specialist, farmer-extensionist etc.) to social and exchange networks of various kinds, to more formally constituted groups and organizations (such as farmers' organizations, cooperatives, village councils, churches etc.) where dimensions concerning legal prescriptions, bureaucratic legitimacy and authority, and defined membership criteria assume greater significance.

Central to the idea of inter-individual networks and organizing practices is the concept of 'livelihood.' Livelihood best expresses the idea of individuals and groups striving to make a living, attempting to meet their various consumption and economic necessities, coping with uncertainties, responding to new opportunities, and choosing between different value positions. Studying livelihoods also entails identifying the relevant social units and fields of activity: one should not prejudge the issue, as many studies do, by fixing upon the more conventional anchorage points for an analysis of economic life such as 'the household,' 'the local community,' 'the production sector' or 'commodity chain.' Indeed in many situations confederations of households and wide-ranging interpersonal networks embracing a wide variety of activities and cross-cutting so-called 'rural' and 'urban' contexts, as well as national frontiers, constitute the social fabric upon which livelihoods and commodity flows are woven. In addition, we need to take account of the normative and cultural dimensions of livelihoods, that is we need to explore the issue of lifestyles and the factors that shape them.

In this regard, Wallman (in her studies of households in Wandsworth, London) makes an interesting contribution when she writes:

'Livelihood is never just a matter of finding or making shelter, transacting money, getting food to put on the family table or to exchange on the market place. It is equally a matter of ownership and circulation of information, the management of skills and relationships, and the affirmation of personal significance [involving issues of self-esteem] and group identity. The tasks of meeting obligations, of security, identity and status, and organizing time are as crucial to livelihood as bread and shelter.' (Wallman 1984).

Wallman does not focus solely then on material or economic resources but also on less materially tangible dimensions which include perceptions, skills, symbolic forms and organizational strategies. Hence she adds to the three conventional categories of material resources, labour and capital, three additional critical elements, namely 'time,' 'information' and 'identity.' The emphasis on the latter brings us to an important, often neglected element, namely, the identity-constructing processes inherent in the pursuit of livelihoods. This is especially relevant since livelihood strategies entail the building of relationships with others whose lifeworlds and status may differ markedly.

Livelihood therefore implies more than just making a living (i.e., economic strategies at household or inter-household levels). It encompasses ways and styles of life/living. It also includes therefore value choice, status, a sense of identity *vis-à-vis* other modes and types of social persons. It implies both a synchronic pattern of relationships existing among a delimited number of persons for solving livelihood problems or sustaining certain types of livelihoods, as well as diachronic processes. The latter

cover actors' livelihood trajectories during their life times, the types of choices they identify and take, and the switches they make between livelihood options.

Livelihoods are both individually and jointly constructed and represent patterns of inter-dependencies between the needs, interests and values of particular sets of individuals. Analysis of the types of inter-dependencies that exist has led, for example, to what Smith (1984) terms 'confederations of households.' The latter consist of a network of ties between a number of residentially discrete households based upon and sustained by a pattern of exchanges and complementarities of livelihood. These confederations may manifest coordinate or centralized networks of social relations (or both); and are likely to change over time due to divergence of interests and activities. Some will decompose and regroup, and new memberships and configurations will emerge. This is a promising field of work that merits further research.

### **Network Configurations**

Social networks are composed of sets of direct and indirect relationships and exchanges. The points in a network may be individuals or organized groups, for example business firms. Their morphological characteristics are related to content and structure; that is, the individual relationships can be depicted in terms of their normative contents and frequency of interaction which shape specific exchanges, while the overall configuration of connecting links can be characterized in terms of span and density. Networks evolve and transform themselves over time, and different types of networks are crucial for pursuing particular ends and engaging in certain forms of action. For example, information and resource mobilization networks are more effective when they are open ended and span a large universe of options, whereas networks required for carrying out specific collective actions (such as mounting strikes, demonstrations, and maintaining terraces or irrigation works) are usually close-knit with high levels of shared interests and norms.

The analysis of formally constituted groups and legally recognized organizations raises issues concerning institutional frameworks, hierarchies of authority, and mechanisms of control and regulation. As mentioned above, rural development scenarios involve a diverse range of institutional forms. While much organizational analysis focuses on formal rules and administrative procedures, highlighting for example the ways in which state, company and development agency rules and regulations shape the workings of organizations, an actor perspective concentrates, among other things, on delineating everyday organizing and symbolizing practises and the interlocking of actors' projects. This difference reflects a concern for emergent forms of interaction, practical strategies and types of discourse

and cultural construction, rather than for administrative models and ideal-typical constructions.

It becomes useful, in analyzing different types of social arrangements within organizations, to identify various ordering principles (see Law 1994). The latter should not, however, be seen as fixed institutional or normative criteria but rather as flexible or contestable interpretive modes for giving some order to the flux of social life. Organizational networks entail overlapping domains and fuzzy boundaries. Thus ordering processes are, as Law suggests, built upon strategic interests and representations of self and other. *Self reflexivity and strategic action relate, of course, to both internal and external 'others.'*

These various social and organizational practices function as a nexus of micro and macro relations and representations, and often involve the development of 'interlocking actor projects' that signals the emergence of a situation wherein self-reflexive strategies mesh to produce a measure of accommodation between the actors concerned. Interlocking projects are therefore crucial for understanding the articulation and management of actor interests and lifeworlds, as well as for the resolution of conflicts. They constitute, that is, a 'new' or 'reestablished' field of enablement, constraints and mutual sanctioning within which new embodiments of agency and social action take shape (for further discussion of the concept of interlocking projects and practices, see Long and van der Ploeg (1994, 1995).

### **The Analytical Challenge of Globalization**

In this final part of the chapter I provide short profiles of recent ongoing research in Wageningen that focus on local/global issues in which actor concepts are central to an understanding of the social processes involved. The themes – 'global commodity networks,' and 'rural livelihoods and transnational migration' – are highly pertinent to the changing nature of the countryside, and raise the need for a reconceptualization of 'rural' problems in a context where livelihoods are now deeply embedded in globalization processes and where the willingness and ability of the state to intervene is lacking. An actor-oriented perspective is eminently suitable for researching these issues since it stresses actor-defined problems, looks closely at organizing processes and networks of social relations, explores the social meanings invested in new and old experiences, and throws theoretical light on the interrelations of meanings, practices and outcomes.

*The Construction and Transformation of Values in New Global Commodity Networks*<sup>11</sup>

New highly differentiated forms of consumption associated with commodities, such as fruit and vegetables, coffee, cocoa, cooking oils, wines, honey and flowers, are nowadays central to the choices and tastes of the consumer. Access to these and their delivery entail a set of linkages between producers, distributors, retailers and consumers. The 'value' of such commodities is, of course, not determined simply at the farm gate. In what is commonly known as 'adding value,' commodities go through a complex and diverse set of reconstituting processes organized in various geographically localized sites. Land-based production, while crucial, is only the start of a long and differentially managed transformation process. Proportionally, agricultural production represents only a minor part of the total value of the product in economic terms, while in social terms a large proportion of symbolic and socially constructed value is added at the processing, distribution, and retail stages. The research in progress develops an analysis of these processes of value construction, contestation and transformation in respect to specific commodities.

New food and other products demanded by consumers often entail new environmental pressures, the reorganization of labour conditions, the introduction of new technologies *vis-à-vis* both production, processing and transportation, new standards of quality assurance, and new notions of what is 'natural' and what is 'artificial.' Such changes have contributed to the segmentation of the market and to the creation of diverse styles of consumption. By means of this process, different linkages and interactions are emerging between commodities, consumers, producers, marketing organizations, the state and regional economic trade blocks (such as the European Union and NAFTA). These linkages generate different networks of commodity circulation and create uneven socio-economic spaces at the global, national, regional and local levels.

Recent studies conducted across Europe, Latin America and Africa point to the changing pressures being exerted on rural producers by European and American supermarket conglomerates, retailers and small-scale operators searching for 'quality' products. Consumer demands for these products put considerable burdens on the capacity of 'sourcing' areas to deliver goods at the volumes required and to certify their quality. In addition, producers are confronted by complex investment strategies, marketing arrangements and regulation policies. This conjuncture of factors may have the effect of displacing or reestablishing specific local institutional forms and configurations of interest (as illustrated, for example, by changes in production units, household livelihoods and family networks). A related issue concerns how far market relations and institutional regulations (implemented by the state or international bodies) dictate the patterns of production and investment at local level and how

social and natural resources are utilized. Here, it is important to explore systematically the room for manoeuvre that opens up for local groups and types of farming practice, and farm and commercial enterprises. It cannot be assumed that such 'external' pressures will always succeed in enrolling local producers and other actors in producing for global markets. Several case studies, for example, demonstrate how local actors reject or transform these global demands.

Producers and agricultural workers sometimes fear that if they become too heavily involved in these processes then other livelihood activities and their welfare interests could be threatened or marginalized. A related dimension is the commitment that people may have to existing lifestyles, and to the defence of their locally situated knowledge. On the other hand, if intervening parties, such as multinational firms, the state or retail organizations, fail to take seriously the ways in which people mobilize and use resources through existing social networks and cultural commitments, then they run the risk of being rejected by, or distanced from, the life experiences and priorities of local producers. Hence, it is important to study how local organizing practices and networks facilitate or constrain the production of high-quality commodities and how external market demands are internalized or modified by local populations.

Although our research aims to focus especially on the dynamics of value creation and transformation at the level of local producer populations, the analysis of commodity flows and linkages necessitates following the passage of commodities into the arenas of processing, marketing, retailing and consumption. For example, the organization of marketing and retailing is, as mentioned above, not simply a process of adding value to the commodity. Rather it constitutes a series of interlocking arenas of struggle in which various parties may contest notions of 'quality,' 'convenience' and 'price.' These contestations and negotiations usually entail the mobilization of arguments about what constitutes consumer preference, the availability and advantages of particular technologies, and issues relating to the material presentation of the commodity to its relevant audiences (i.e., the supermarkets, small retailers, 'alternative' food shop owners, and an array of different consumer interests). It is in this way that commodities emerge as 'mobilizers' of resources, thus contributing to the construction and reconstruction of markets and of particular consumer lifestyles in contemporary society. Such a commodity approach aims therefore to identify how new bridges are built between producers, distributors, retailers and consumers.

Following commodities in this way permits us to analyse how social resources and cultural repertoires are mobilized and how 'old' and 'new' forms of social value are distributed among the different social actors. This has implications for defining the types and degrees of authority and power exercised by the different parties at the different stages in the circulation of commodities – a matter for critical reevaluation given the

rather simple notions of value creation and appropriation found in much of the current literature.

Undertaking a commodity flow analysis, which gives attention to the organizing properties of commodities and people (what Appadurai 1986 calls 'the social life of commodities'), opens up a related line of enquiry which has so far been neglected, namely an exploration of the processes by which people and their 'objects of desire' generate certain cultural identifications that segment markets and reorganize physical and social space around meanings and practice. Methodologically this means examining the contestation of value in different domains and arenas of social action: for example, at the level of producers' associations in which they debate production strategies and deal with external interventions; at the points of purchasing, packaging and transporting the commodity during which conflicts often arise between the producers, lorry drivers, entrepreneurs, trading companies and the workers in the packing plants or at docks; and at the receiving end when disagreements may arise between importers, retailers and consumer associations over issues of quality, shape, taste and price. An additional important element that shapes the nature and possible outcomes of these contestations concerns the deployment of specific language strategies and discourses that represent the 'political' positioning of the different actors in the networks and arenas concerned. Such language practices help to identify the nature of actors' differential expectations and how they justify their choices and actions. Clashes of language and representations in respect to consumption priorities can be illustrated by the present often heated debates surrounding food and notions of a 'healthy' diet, nutritional 'needs,' and 'environmental pollution.'

#### *Migration, Globalization, and Transnational Networks*<sup>12</sup>

Previous studies of migration have tended to represent the flow of people to new locations in terms of the adaptation or adjustment of new migrants to their 'host' societies, or they have offered a dualistic analysis of the interrelations of peripheral places of origin and central places of destination. More recently, migration flows have been reinterpreted as an integral feature of the global economy, giving rise to new types of 'nomadic' peoples and transnational communities. Hence an essential aspect of the social life of 'global nomads' or international migrants is the fact that their networks ('real' and 'imagined') reach out into the wider realm of transnational space linking them not only to their places of origin but also to compatriots living in widely dispersed locations. These networks of persons and places are bound together through 'collective' memories and images of a common place of origin and a network of places of migration.

Though it has been commonplace in much of the literature to depict these migrant flows in terms of the emergence of new international divi-



sions of labour, a more interesting facet concerns the nature and development of particular transnational networks of people and places. This entails detailed research on the interlocking of 'localized,' 'transnational,' 'nomadic' and 'hybrid' cultures and identities. So far research has accorded only minor attention to these inter-cultural processes and their consequences.

This involves an understanding of the significance of the emergence of a globalized culture characterized by a continuous flow of ideas, information, values and tastes mediated through mobile individuals, symbolic tokens and often electronic simulations (Waters 1995). Such flows take place in culturally constructed social fields and spaces that make possible new 'imagined communities' (Anderson 1983) that are increasingly detached from fixed locations or territories. This phenomenon indeed constitutes a major challenge for actor-oriented research since it throws into question the implicit assumptions of some formulations that domains and social arenas coincide with delimited spatial and territorialized settings.

In the case of global migrants and refugees, their social lives are still tied to particular notions of 'place' and 'home community,' but these are reworked to include a wide network of individuals and institutions physically located in very different places (e.g., localities in Europe and the USA, in city neighbourhoods and villages, as well as in the community of origin). The precise constituency and salience of the particular 'imagined communities' to which people belong, will, of course, vary according to the geographical locations of the groups and individuals involved, the relevant issues at hand, members' accessibility in terms of communication media, their visions of the future etc. Also family members back in the home setting, may themselves participate in these practices of constructing 'imagined communities.'

A similar type of reasoning leads Appadurai (1990) to suggest the mapping of human activity in a globalized world in terms of flows of people (tourists, migrants, refugees), capital, information, political ideas and values within particular ethnoscapes, finanscapes, technoscapes and ideoscapes. Clearly these elements are central to understanding the lifeworlds and orientations of international migrants and refugees, but equally they are relevant for returnees and for those who choose not to migrate, since the latter too are exposed via interpersonal ties and media to such global forms. The flows of 'home-destined' goods (such as taped music, garments, furniture styles, house decorations, 'exotic' posters, foreign mementos, family photographs, etc.) carry with them specific meanings and values associated with the migrants' 'global' lifeworld. This global space, we argue, is indeed a critical area for defining or crystallizing new notions of 'community' and 'belonging' that are now emerging within rural localities of many parts of the world.

Another way in which migration is linked to globalization is the diminished capacity of nation states to control the flow of people and goods across their borders. Here it is important to take account of the fact that migrant lifeworlds include encounters or avoidance of contact with various agencies of migration control that seek to define eligibility in terms of national citizenship and to regulate the movement of 'aliens' in and out of national territories. Hence, research on this topic should include a study of those agencies involved in managing (controlling) the in-flow of migrants and refugees seen from an organizational, legal-normative, brokerage, and cultural point of view. Linked to this is the exploration of how precisely migrants enter national spaces illegally and how they find a place to live, find work and establish themselves within an acceptable social environment with which they can to some extent identify.

This has led to an interest in analyzing the emergence of so-called transnational migrant communities, and the associated practices of transnationalism (Appadurai and Breckenridge 1988; Gupta 1992; Kearney 1991; Rouse 1991; Basch, Glick Schille and Szanton Blanc 1992). Transnationalism, however, should not imply that the nation state has ceased to be an important referent in the imagination of space or in the situated practices of migrants, returnees and villagers. Instead, as Gupta (1992, p. 63) argues, the inscription of space in representations of the nation state now occurs in a deterritorialized way. Hence notions of belonging and 'citizenship' become harnessed less to the idea of a particular national political system than to ethnic identities that transcend borders and to imagined notions of place and home (such as a specific village or Andean valley); and they often take shape under the influence of global debates (launched by new social and ethnic movements).

The role of ethnicity and bonds of common origin among migrants has been acknowledged by various writers as an important cultural resource in the building of social networks and associational forms essential to migrants' livelihoods and identities (see, for instance, Altamirano 1980; Kearney 1988). Yet, on the other side of the equation, one must also recognize the rapid communication of new cultural values through letters, phone calls, the sending of family photos and videos, and the ease of modern travel for visits, and how they can shape the visions, aspirations and expectations of those remaining in the home community. In this way, relatives and friends can share in the discovery of new ethnic commitments and 'community' identities based upon globalized discourses and images, stressing, for example, the need for so-called indigenous peoples to fight for habitat rights and manage their own environmental resources.

The other face of contemporary population movements is the displacement of people due to socio-political violence and the consequent dislocation of economic life and livelihood patterns. In the aftermath of violent conflict, many elements are reconfigured: relations of power, techniques of government, modes of organization, livelihoods, identities and collective

memories, and the relations between people and places. Displaced groups are often reluctant to return to their villages and regions of origin after the cessation of hostilities, and if they do they often reconstruct their lives on the basis of new values, desires and organizational assets or deficits. Frequently they continue to depend on support networks and patterns of aid and resources assembled during their period of exile; and some returnees never in fact fully return. Instead they live within 'multiple realities' where, if they have the necessary strategic skills and knowledge, they can access a wide range of livelihood options, which continue to tie them to both their places of origin and of exile. Other less fortunate individuals or households, of course, may become trapped cognitively and emotionally in the traumas of violence and displacement and be unable effectively to rebuild their social lives and livelihoods.

Seen from another point of view, such former conflict-ridden areas become frontiers where new battles are fought out between the engaging parties involved in the reconstruction process, represented by the state, international development agencies, political groupings and various local actors and families. A characteristic of these situations is the emergence of unstable tactical alliances and the continuous clash and transformation of interests, priorities and world views. If solutions are to be negotiated between the opposing parties then careful analysis is required to reveal the rhythm and dynamics of the various social, cultural and political reconstructions that take place.

Given the increasing vulnerabilities of many rural populations in the face of global economic change and political violence, the analysis of differing scenarios and outcomes of global commodity networks, transnational migration and the movement of displaced persons will continue for the foreseeable future to be major topics for research. These processes raise critical issues concerning the viability of certain types of livelihoods and modes of organization, and address fundamental questions about changes in cultural identity and social relations in what looks like being an increasingly transnational and deterritorialized 'rural' world.

## Notes

- 1 Regimes of accumulation and modes of regulation in the global economy can be illustrated by what are called 'food systems' or 'food regimes' (see Marsden and Little 1990; Friedmann 1993) in the literature on agricultural development. Regimes of accumulation are empirically defined phases of capital accumulation and social reproduction. New regimes are generated when internal contradictions or technological developments can no longer be contained by the mode of regulation (i.e., the regulatory mechanisms pertaining to fiscal control, taxation, labour relations, wage systems, commercial practices and external relations), leading to the establishment of a new type of regime. For a detailed critical assessment of this type of analysis *vis-à-vis* an actor perspective, see Lockie (1996, pp. 31–55). In line with the argument of this chapter, Lockie (1996, p. 25) suggests that the

- debate should be recast 'in terms of historically contingent social arrangements and relations of production developed through the social practices of *all* those involved.'
- 2 As I have documented elsewhere (Long 1992, pp. 20–22), actor-oriented analysis as applied to development processes builds upon earlier anthropological work focusing upon strategic action and social practice (e.g., Bailey 1969, Barth's collected essays 1981, Kapferer 1976, and Bourdieu 1977; see also Ortner 1984 for a critical synopsis).
  - 3 It goes without saying that the concept of 'social actor' applies not only to single individual actors but also to other entities (e.g., coalitions or networks of actors) that can meaningfully be attributed with the power of agency, that is they possess the capacity to process experience and to act upon it. Agency is composed of social relations and how the latter are represented and can only become effective through them. One obviously still unresolved theoretical issue concerns how far one can regard non-human entities as actors and how to analyse man-machine relations.
  - 4 'The concept functions as a metaphor for depicting areas of structural discontinuity inherent in social life generally but especially salient in 'intervention' situations. In other words, it sensitizes the researcher to the importance of exploring how discrepancies of social interest, cultural interpretation, knowledge and power are mediated and perpetuated or transformed at critical points of linkage or confrontation.' (Long 1989, p. 221).
  - 5 It is often erroneously assumed that that 'complexity' is to be located towards the 'large' end of the continuum of scale, thus implying that modern societies, whose scale of social relations is said to be large, are *ipso facto* 'more complex.' Rather, as Strathern (1995) has insisted, we should consider complexity not as a property of some kind of ontologically real world but as the product of human, culturally specific perceptions. Hence we need to put aside simple dichotomized notions such as simple/complex, micro/macro, and work towards an understanding of how actors process their experiences and develop practical strategies for dealing with them. On the basis of this, we will be able to reveal the contents of both the meanings and relationships of social practice, and to establish how far they are extended organizationally or prosthetically through the use of technology to embrace actors and institutional domains that are geographically, but probably not culturally or perceptually, remote.
  - 6 See Mongbo 1995 for an analysis of this process in a programme of agricultural development in Benin.
  - 7 In biology, polymorphism denotes situations in which two or more variants of a species co-exist. An intriguing example is that of the African *Papilio dardanus* butterfly, whose females mimic in colour and wing patterning several other species. This heterogeneity protects them from certain predators who mistake them for other, nasty-tasting butterflies, giving them a better chance of survival.
  - 8 In fairness to Turner, we should note that he applies a more wide-ranging and historical approach to the analysis of social dramas in his later studies of political and religious movements (see Turner 1974; also Moore 1986).
  - 9 The uprising was timed to coincide with the inauguration of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) between the United States and Mexico, which was the linchpin of the new package of neoliberal measures introduced by the Salinas government.
  - 10 Thus, as both Latour (1987) and Appadurai (1986) argue – though from different theoretical standpoints – a sociology of social action necessitates also a sociology and epistemology of things (see also Miller 1987).
  - 11 This theme is being explored by a team of researchers that includes Aiberto Arce, Magdalena Villarreal, Magdalena Barros Nock and myself.
  - 12 A project on this theme is presently being undertaken in respect to the central highlands of Peru under the coordination of myself and Pieter de Vries (Wageningen), Teofilo Altamirano (Catholic University, Lima, Peru), and Moshe Shokeid (Tel-Aviv University, Israel).