

11 Agrarian Change, Neoliberalism and Commoditization. A Perspective on Social Value¹

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Setting the Scene: Mexico as an Instructive Case

Like most other countries, the agrarian sector of Mexico is presently undergoing massive economic and organizational restructuring following the adoption of neoliberal policies aimed at reducing the role of the state in favour of the market in promoting agricultural development. The implementation of such policies has entailed a number of measures that have bitten deeply into the fabric of agrarian life. These measures include: the dismantling of protectionist legislation designed to open up the economy to foreign investment and to force Mexican producers and entrepreneurs to compete on the basis of 'comparative advantage' in international markets; the negotiation of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) aimed at stimulating the 'free' flow of commodities and investments within the new trade zone, leading to closer integration of the Mexican and US/Canadian economies; the withdrawal of government subsidies on agricultural products and of support for government agencies involved in the provision of agricultural inputs (particularly credit) and in the processing and marketing of products; and, last but not least, the privatization of *ejido* indigenous community land which has necessitated the redrafting of Article 27 of the Mexican Constitution, making it possible now for the first time for *ejido* and *comunidad* plots to be granted private titles and to be bought and sold.

Such policy shifts are, as many recent studies show, having a major impact on the livelihoods and life circumstances of rural populations. In fact, the changes taking place represent some of the most radical agrarian transformations that Mexico has witnessed since the initial implementation of the Agrarian Reform in the 1930s and 1940s.

We should not, however, overlook the continuities with the past. Hence what looks like a profound change in agrarian property rights turns out to be much less dramatic when we consider its antecedents. In 1992, the Salinas government passed the amendment to the Constitution in order to privatize the *ejido* sector, but in doing so gave a legitimacy and legal status to various, already commonplace, renting and selling practices. Another example concerns the cross-border flow of commodities (including migrant

labour) which, though often technically illegal, has been a regular feature of south-north trade for decades, and one actively supported by both US and Mexican interests. Thus the freeing of import/export restrictions through NAFTA does not initiate many entirely new processes; rather it reinforces and expands the already well-established social and spatial networks linking Mexican producers, consumers and households with their counterparts in the frontier towns and the US hinterland. The opening up of new markets, new types and sites of production, new trading arrangements, and new economic relations does not therefore imply the forging of completely new modes of organization, regulation and cultural encounter.

This mixing of 'new' and 'old' is compounded by the discrepancies that exist in different social arenas between the discourse of neoliberal policy, different actors' interpretations of its contents and consequences, and actual social practice: in the policy-making arena where debates among politicians, policy makers and economic advisers take place; at the frontline where policies are implemented and where government officials exercise discretion as to how precisely to interpret and apply particular measures; and at the level of rural producers and other economic actors such as traders and agricultural workers, who struggle to come to terms – cognitively and organizationally – with the new economic ideology and changing livelihood conditions.

Such complexities underline the need to explore how 'economic liberalization' and 'privatization' values (based for example on notions of the 'power of the market' and the 'efficiency' of private enterprise) are fortified, transformed, or subsumed by other values (such as those associated with notions of 'community interest,' 'family solidarity,' or 'social entitlement'). We need to analyse, that is, how different discourses and value frames intersect in the shaping of everyday life. Although neoliberal ideas may carry a certain clout – because they are promoted vigorously by 'authoritative' bodies – they can never fully override other value commitments. Indeed it is the very interplay and accommodation *vis-à-vis* 'counterposing' discourses, beliefs and social practice that provides the basis for the 'internalization' of neoliberalism in a variety of social contexts, although a good deal more research is required to establish how far such neoliberal notions have actively permeated particular lifeworlds.

Of course, in Mexico the interpenetration of distinctive discourses and ideologies has a long history. The advent of neoliberalism has simply heightened the process. For example, long-standing strands of populist and participatory ideology – deeply embedded in discussions of the 'agrarian question' and issues of 'social equity' – have once again come to the fore, not only in the struggles launched by local groups complaining about and challenging neoliberal measures and social conditions (of which

the Chiapas uprising has been the most dramatic), but also within the discourses articulated by politicians and various government agencies.

This was clearly illustrated in the implementation of the special presidential National Solidarity Programme (*PRONASOL* or *solidaridad*), which consisted of an assortment of subprogrammes dealing with social welfare, production, regional development and investment projects. As many commentators have concluded, the primary aim of *PRONASOL* seemed to be 'to repair the tattered social safety net' brought by the economic crisis and austerity measures of the de la Madrid period and then aggravated by economic liberalization and privatization (Cornelius, Craig and Fox 1994, pp. 3-26). The ideology of the programme appealed to populist and community self-help sentiments with a view to promoting 'partnership' or 'co-responsibility' projects between local groups and government. These projects were designed to alleviate the marginalization of the 'weaker' economic actors whose livelihoods were undermined or threatened. In this way, liberalizing and privatizing efforts were tempered by the realization of the social costs entailed and by the need to comply with, and capitalize upon, deeply ingrained Mexican discourses (arising partly out of the experience, gains, and symbols of the Mexican Revolution) concerning social equity and the political rights of civil society. The result was what Salinas labelled '*social liberalism*.'

These opening remarks are intended to provide a brief orientation to the types of empirical and analytical issues central to understanding agrarian change in Mexico. In common with most other agrarian situations, the future of rural Mexico continues to be bound up with neoliberal thinking that gives theoretical credence to the 'workings of the market' as a way of allocating resources more efficiently and improving economic and institutional performance.²

An understanding of the restructuring of agrarian life and of rural livelihoods under neoliberalism must centre, then, upon an analysis of how commoditization processes impinge upon, or are presumed to shape, the everyday lives and strategies of various economic actors.³ The Mexican case not only provides an interesting empirical setting for the study of commodity relations and values, but also invites one to open up new analytical perspectives on this issue. The core of this chapter therefore is devoted to the exposition of a number of erstwhile neglected analytical aspects of commoditization. But first, I must sketch the general theoretical path I intend to follow.

General Theoretical Groundings

Underpinning the argument is my concern to advance an actor-oriented and social constructivist approach to the study of agrarian change. Such

an approach contests structuralist perspectives founded upon notions of 'modernization' or 'political economy,' as well as more recent neo-Weberian or post-Marxist formulations that attempt to avoid the pitfalls of essentialism and teleology characteristic of earlier structural theories of change (Booth 1994, pp. 11-13).

In contrast to structural perspectives, an actor-oriented analysis seeks to uncover the interactive processes by which social life is constructed, reproduced and transformed. It finds no place for the notion of 'structure' as a set of external forces or conditions that delimit or regulate specific modes of action. Instead it focuses on how so-called 'externalities' are mediated by the strategies, understandings and commitments of different actors and actor-networks, thereby generating a variegated pattern of social forms that represent differential responses to similar 'problematic' circumstances (Long and van der Ploeg 1994). Actor-oriented analysis addresses itself primarily to three issues: the explanation of heterogeneity and its social significance; the analysis of 'interface' situations wherein actors' lifeworlds interlock, accommodate, or collide with each other; and the delineation of the capacities of particular organizing practices for effecting change.

An actor-oriented approach, I contend, affords a more grounded understanding of the dynamics of social change and intervention – in this case, of certain patterns of agrarian development – while at the same time continuing to recognize the significance of 'global' technological, institutional, politico-economic and cultural change for local populations (Long 1994).

Developing an Actor Perspective on Agrarian Issues

Unlike recent populist writings that attempt to rescue the peasantry or other 'subordinate' classes from the obscurity of history by according them an active role in the making of agrarian change (see Calagione, Francis and Nugent 1992), a more thorough-going actor-oriented analysis offers a 'view from below' that embraces also the interlocking strategies, dilemmas and images of change experienced and promoted by non-peasant, non-subaltern actors. The range of actors involved might include government functionaries, export-company entrepreneurs, irrigation officials, village-level leaders, political bosses, private landowners, small-holder peasants, groups of village women, agricultural workers, traders, as well as a host of non-present actors such as policy makers, development 'experts,' and media creators and communicators who shape the conduct of others through 'action at a distance,' often through the mediation of non-human elements such as policy documents, technological packages, and material 'conditionalities.'⁴

An actor-oriented approach, then, sheds important light on the social construction of agrarian life and livelihoods.⁵ It does this by identifying the

social practices and cultural interpretations developed by the different actors for dealing with the problems they face. These processes involve struggles over access to productive resources, over inputs such as credit, labour and technology, over opportunities for investment or accumulation, and over the creation of space for the pursuit of specific individual or group initiatives. They also entail the encounter and mutual accommodation or negotiation of differing bodies of knowledge, discourse and cultural practice. In each 'problematic' situation, the respective actors draw, explicitly or implicitly, on previous experiences and understandings, and commit whatever material, symbolic or social resources they can muster for resolving the problems as they perceive them. This process, of course, would hold for agricultural day-labourers as much as for company entrepreneurs, state bureaucrats, or political bosses.

While most scholars would readily agree that an understanding of agrarian change would be sadly deficient if an appreciation of the interests and strategies of the key actors were missing, few have yet grasped the full significance of introducing into the analysis such an actor-oriented perspective. For example, it is often simply assumed that the outcomes of struggles between agrarian actors are primarily determined by those who 'possess' power or have leverage over the 'weaker parties,' who thereby become the losers. This image comes close to a zero-sum conception of politics, which fails to address, as populist writers have convincingly shown, the complex and subtle manipulative ways in which the weak may shape the negotiations that take place, thus extracting certain significant benefits for themselves (Scott 1985). And sometimes they may even hoodwink the more 'powerful' actors into unwittingly agreeing to terms that later turn out to be highly unfavourable to them. Extending this line of argument, one can also claim that any effective imposition, for example, of state laws or programmes of development, or of measures aimed at promoting the 'logic of the market,' must necessarily depend upon whether or not, and to what degree, the various actors involved in these processes come to accept these interventions as legitimate or at least not worth contesting.

Viewed in this way, even large-scale interventions aimed at transforming existing forms of agriculture, such as state-organized irrigation schemes (backed by international funding and expertise), can only effectively come into operation if there is some measure of agreement or co-responsibility amongst the various actors involved. They cannot simply be imposed and steered in strict accordance with some ready-made, externally devised plan. While it may be true that small-scale cultivators, petty traders and landless workers are by and large excluded from the critical decisions relating to the allocation of resources (e.g., of plots of land or credit) and from the design of systems of land tenure and production, it would not be valid to visualize them as having no significant part to play in the implementation or modification of such plans; nor would it be

justifiable to assume that these 'less influential' actors have no room for manoeuvre and no possibilities for pursuing their own 'projects' within the framework of these schemes.

Indeed, as van der Zaag (1992, pp. 135-158) has meticulously documented in a study of irrigation practice in a government-managed scheme in western Mexico, the annual irrigation plan drawn up by the agricultural engineers, which determines the land areas to be devoted to particular crops, the amounts of water allocated to them, and the level of water fees to be charged, was not in any sense regarded as a binding charter by either senior management staff, water guards or farmers. In fact everybody knew that the critical decisions relating to crops and water distribution were not taken in the making of the plan, but rather were negotiated in other arenas and at other times. Hence, whatever the plan detailed, decisions about sugar allocation were in fact made behind closed doors between the senior irrigation staff, the sugar mill manager and his technicians, and farmers' representatives; and water scheduling was negotiated directly at the interface between individual farmers and the water guard responsible for the particular irrigation block. The irrigation plan had something of a 'scientific image about it,' with the mass of quantitative data, graphs and calculations that went into producing it, but the practicalities of operating the irrigation scheme were different. The plan served well for demonstrating to higher level officials from the Ministry of Agriculture that district staff were professionally competent and had everything under control, but badly for predicting or understanding the dynamics of social behaviour within the scheme.

As this example highlights, an actor-oriented perspective views state intervention and the 'modernization' of agriculture as a set of ongoing socially constructed and negotiated processes involving specific actors. They are not disembodied structural transformations but entail interaction, competition, conflict and negotiation between persons and groups of differing origins, ideology and resources. In short, they consist of a complex series of social encounters and interfaces involving persons belonging to contrasting, and sometimes even seemingly incompatible, lifeworlds.

In order, therefore, to delve beneath the generalities and so-called 'central' tendencies of agrarian change, we need to pay close attention to the interlocking, distantiation, and mutual transformation of different lifeworlds, and to the interplay of actors' strategies, interests and cultural representations. Actors' 'projects' are not, as it were, simply embedded in structural settings defined by commodity circuits or state-organized development programmes. Rather, 'it is through the ways in which they interlock that they create, reproduce and transform particular 'structures'' (Long and van der Ploeg 1994, p. 82). Only in this way can we come to a full theoretical and empirical appreciation of the differentiated nature of agrarian life and change.

All this implies a quite new conceptualization of agrarian processes and change: one that distances itself from simple techno-agricultural and political-economic models of agrarian structure. The latter offer very limited visions of agrarian systems and fail to grasp the need to view agrarian and market structures as 'in-the-making' socially and symbolically, that is, as emergent, socially constructed forms whose meanings are attributed and negotiated by the various actors implicated in their construction, reproduction and transformation. As I mentioned earlier, such actors of course may or may not be physically present in specific agrarian locales: indeed important actors such as state officials, development donors, bank directors, politicians, food retailers and consumers are often far removed from the struggles of farmers, farm households and other rural inhabitants. Furthermore, technologies and policies are attributed with agency (i.e., they are conferred with the capacity to influence certain outcomes such as increased production levels or more effective social organization)⁶ by those who create them (scientists and planners), by those who introduce them (agricultural extension workers or land reform officials), and by various categories of users (such as male and female farmers, labourers, engineers and politicians).

The range and complexity of analytical issues that this approach raises are enormous. In theoretical terms it calls for a major rethinking of certain critical concepts and processes such as 'agrarian development,' 'state intervention,' 'commoditization,' 'scientification,' 'agricultural knowledge,' 'globalization' and 'agrarian movements,' Commoditization, in particular, occupies a key place in both modernization and political economy theories and is, of course, the central theoretical pivot to contemporary neoliberal thinking. It is thus a highly relevant topic for exploring new theoretical terrain. The next part of this chapter, then, lays the foundations for an actor-oriented perspective on commoditization processes.

The Commoditization Debate

Some ten years ago we published a collection of papers entitled *The Commoditization Debate* (Long et al. 1986). The main purpose of this volume was to challenge existing structural analyses of commoditization,⁷ giving particular attention to works that attempted to interpret the transformation of peasantries within a simple commodity model (Bernstein 1977, 1979 and 1986; see also Friedmann 1981 and Goodman and Redclift 1985). The theme of the collection, however, extended to consider more generally the shortcomings of political economy perspectives and to argue the case for an actor-oriented approach.

One unresolved issue concerned how far these contrasting theoretical schema might be reconciled to produce a more rounded analysis of the complexity and heterogeneity of commoditization and of market

phenomena more generally. The debate brought to light the inherent epistemological and theoretical incompatibilities of structural versus actor explanations; and pointed to the need for a new theorization of 'commodity' relations and social value that would give proper attention to the analysis of the 'globalizing' tendencies of commoditization, whilst at the same time allowing for an understanding of how commodity notions and relations are 'mediated and translated by the specific strategies and understandings of the actors involved' (Long and van der Ploeg 1989, p. 238).

Yet, despite the various attempts to take up this challenge, we are still it seems far from achieving a satisfactory theoretical synthesis. Indeed, in hindsight, one might conclude that the effort was doomed to failure from the start precisely because, even though we took a strong actor/social constructivist position, we assumed like other scholars that the transformation of economic life and the meaning of goods (both material and symbolic) could be reduced, following Marx's theory of value, to an analysis of the interplay of 'commodity' (exchange) and 'non-commodity' (use) values and relations.

The problem with this formulation is, in the first place, that it posits implicitly the existence of two distinctive modes of value and practice: that dependent upon market rationalities and the conversion of 'use' into 'exchange' value and that governed by non-market principles and social reciprocities. Of course, as a caveat, most writers would acknowledge that reality is considerably more messy and that this distinction is drawn solely for heuristic reasons. Nevertheless casting the analysis primarily in terms of commodity versus non-commodity forms – which clearly owes a lot to anthropological discussions of 'exchange' relations versus 'gift-giving' (Gregory 1982; Strathern 1988) – shifts attention away from the more intriguing problems of how, when and by whom commodity values, over and against other types of value, are judged to be central to the definition of particular social relationships and to the status of specific goods.

While much has since been written on this issue, only recently have discussions achieved a degree of theoretical sophistication through, for example, the analysis of the significance of trust and other types of social commitment in the development and reproduction of commodity relations and economic contracts (see Granovetter 1985; Alexander 1992 and Perri 6 1994 for interesting contributions). It has also been persuasively demonstrated that many relationships involving the movement of goods between social actors are best understood as prestations or 'recursive works that juxtapose and valorize' the different social entities involved, not strictly as 'transactions' expressing the relation between the things exchanged (Thomas 1991, p. 32, and Strathern 1988). A third area of new research concerns the question of how contrasting discourses – dealing for instance with 'the community,' 'the state,' 'nature' and

'the moral order' – intersect in the processes by which commodity relations are formed and valorized. Somewhat paradoxically, but not surprisingly, these non-market dimensions have emerged as critically important in an era of neoliberal discourse, where increasingly it has become evident that the 'advancement of the market' and the 'logic of free enterprise' depend crucially upon certain non-market relations, beliefs and commitments.

An Actor Perspective on Commodities and Value

What was needed in 1986 – and remains a central issue in 1997 – is a more thorough-going treatment of the processes by which commodity and other social values enter the agrarian scene and shape social practice. The field of agricultural development and food systems offers an especially interesting area of enquiry because it inherently throws up a complex mixture of social values – some based upon notions of 'modernized' farming, family and farm property commitments, or the centrality of cost-benefit calculations, and others on questions of taste, cultural habits and the idea of simply clinging to 'what we know' or on the issue of the purity of organically as against chemically produced food, and yet others representing the political struggles that occur between different interest groups within the food chain (e.g., consumers, supermarkets, transnational companies, governments, private entrepreneurs, and agricultural producers and labourers).

As a self-critique, then, one might argue that *The Commoditization Debate* clung too closely to established categories of analysis – mainly those of political economy and peasant studies – and sought to create space from within for actor and cultural perspectives. Instead it should perhaps have adopted a more robust actor-oriented position, arguing for an analysis that addressed itself more directly to the social construction of economic life. This would have allowed for the exploration of a number of critical issues, which we later took up in *The Battlefields of Knowledge* (1992), concerning the interlocking of actor 'projects,' multiple discourses, and power and knowledge domains (see especially the chapters dealing with commodity issues by Andrew Long and Verschoor). This would have led to a better appreciation of the ways in which commodity relations and values are generated, and challenged, through the active strategizing, network building and knowledge construction of particular producers, retailers, consumers and other relevant actors.

Such a perspective underlines the important point that 'commoditization' is driven, defined or contested by the actions of specific actors. It is not a disembodied process with its own 'laws of motion,' nor can it be reduced to some abstract notion of 'market forces' that propel people into gainful economic action or impoverish them. Rather, commoditiza-

tion processes take shape through the actions of a diverse set of inter-linked social actors and are composed of specific constellations of interests, values and resources. Commoditization has no given and necessary trajectory, except that negotiated by the parties involved, and as a process it is never 'complete.' It constitutes a label we apply to ongoing processes that involve social and discursive struggles over livelihoods, economic values and images of 'the market.' In fact it is more a way of looking at things than a clearly defined special category of things. As Kopytoff (1986) and Appadurai (1986) have insightfully observed, like people, things have biographies composed of diverse sets of circumstances, wherein at some points or in some arenas they are accorded the status of commodities (i.e., attributed with exchange value, either potential or realized), whilst in other contexts they are not. In this way things are seen to move in and out of the status of being considered a commodity or are viewed by the same or different persons as simultaneously embodying both commodity and non-commodity values. Also, within any given social context, the interpretation and significance of 'exchange' value as against other kinds of value will vary or be contested. Thus, while present policy discourse mostly accords a positive image of market mechanisms, free enterprise and commodity forms, the argument can quickly be turned around. For example, as Taussig (1980) has demonstrated in his analysis of proletarianization processes among peasants in the Andes, the notion of commoditization may also form the basis for a critique by local actors of capitalist relations, in a similar manner to Marx's own exposure of the mystification and 'evils' of commodity fetishism.

So far the argument has mostly concentrated on the 'commodity' end of the spectrum of values, but similar issues arise when so-called 'non-commoditized' goods or relationships are contested by certain actors who wish for strategic reasons to demonstrate the 'added value' of treating them as commodities. Being enshrined in modern state law and economic practice, the commodity form – so it is argued – is likely to carry greater clout and legitimacy. Yet how far market language and institutions undermine the discursive and moral basis of non-commodity values and commitments remains to be seen. For example, market arguments for the privatization of *ejido* land (state-owned peasant holdings) in Mexico have met with some resistance, due mainly to the existence of peasant solidarities of one kind or another that aim to promote a sense of community and egalitarianism. It is easy enough to declare the privatization of community resources but it is another thing to persuade peasants to put aside community or *ejido* interests and values in favour of neoliberal attitudes. On the other hand, certain groups of *ejidatarios* and *comuneros* (community members) may welcome privatization and increased market involvement as a way of helping

them to consolidate their entrepreneurial ambitions; and there will be yet others who will no doubt hedge their bets.⁸

Commodity and non-commodity issues then are matters of contention: they involve actors' differential interpretations of the social significance of particular people, things and relationships. Hence we must recognize the multiplicity of social values held by actors and the existence of many different and competing 'theories' of social value. An actor-oriented approach focuses therefore on the elucidation of alternative actor theories of social value and how they interrelate, rather than on the search for a single 'new' theory of value. From this point of view we can never have a single theory of social value – whether Marxist or non-Marxist; we can only have actor-generated value notions that form part of the 'mental' and 'moral' maps of individual and collective actors, and which crystallize within the encounters that take place between them.

Exploring Social Value

On the basis of this, a number of critical issues arise which constitute the central concern of a number of monographs on agrarian change and planned intervention produced by social researchers at Wageningen over recent years.⁹ How are social values negotiated, when evidently there exists a multiplicity of values attached to particular goods and relationships? How do particular people/interest groups promote their points of view, their valorizations? How do certain discourses gain preeminence and enrol others? What are the situational components that shape the negotiation process? How do the qualities (intrinsic and extrinsic) of particular products affect the meanings that people give to them? Is the fixing of value predominantly related to production, exchange or consumption? What is the relative weighing of the various sets of interests involved?

Whereas neoclassical theories give priority to consumers in the fixing of value (through their demand for particular qualities and quantities of products), Marxist theory stresses the role of production, in particular the way in which the input of labour time generates value which is then converted from use value into exchange value through the market; environmentalist 'green' theory stresses the importance of the retention of stocks of natural resources or 'capital' (i.e., 'sustainable' resources) in the attribution of value; and community and family interests propound other values such as the importance of making prestations for consolidating social relations and guaranteeing reciprocal help in times of distress. Even inputs such as paid labour may not be evaluated simply in terms of commoditized value since they may not be given with the intention of receiving benefits of a material or cash kind, but rather in order to

reproduce certain social arrangements regarded as essential for the well-being of the group or community as a whole.

The latter point is neatly illustrated in a study of an Indian community in highland Peru by Lund Skar (1984). Having described the network of non-wage labour exchanges that reinforces village solidarity and the strongly held attitudes against offering wages or claiming wage benefits for working in the maize fields with neighbours or kinsmen, she goes on to address the question of the occasional instance when labour is in fact hired for a daily cash wage. Yet even here it seems that the money paid over functions principally to oblige the worker to reciprocate at a later date: 'In reality the same money, bills and coins, are often paid back and forth, and it seems that the money is rather kept as a security than as a currency for buying and selling' (Skar 1982, p. 215). Continuing for a moment with the same ethnographic context, one might also note that coins figure prominently in Andean marriage ritual and are often believed to give off a powerful vapour which derives from mysterious buried treasures called *waris*. The newly-wed couple is advised to keep these coins safely as a guarantee of prosperity (Isbell 1978, p. 121-122).

These examples bring out the co-existence of several, seemingly incompatible interpretations of social value within the same set of social relations which people nevertheless quite easily live with, until of course certain events precipitate the need to clear up the ambiguities in order to negotiate an agreed point of view or simply to agree to differ. This concern for the fixing of value occurs, for example, at junctures in certain political processes where value incompatibilities and social discontinuities – often reflected in the emergence of markedly divergent lifestyles – reach a peak and begin to generate schisms within the group or network of relations. At this point explicit struggles may occur over the attribution of social meanings and value, access to resources, and in relation to issues and differences of social identity. This process is a regular feature of the ways in which class or status divisions become consolidated or are disputed within a community or social group. Religious fiestas in Latin America, for example, often become

'the organizational vehicles [and public occasions] for reaffirming, reconstituting or reordering social relationships and networks. This process is intimately tied to the expression and possible reformulation of the symbolic and material value of certain relationships and groupings . . . Yet, [fiestas] do more than this, they constitute arenas within which new patterns..of differentiation and opposition or cooperation/collaboration are generated. They do not merely mirror wider structural processes, they too have generative power. They may 'bring to the surface' the facts of social differentiation and class struggle. Participating in a fiesta may, thus, increase the consciousness of structural change and thereby promote it (e.g., increasing integration into wider fields of relationships spanning rural and urban

scenarios which connect the village to the mine or city)' (Laité and Long 1987, p. 28).

In other words, the study of fiestas and other public rituals offer interesting insights into the processes of value affirmation, confrontation and reconfiguration. This is especially true during periods of major social change when values and attitudes may become more polarized and at the same time increasingly slippery and ambiguous.¹⁰

Struggles and apparent inconsistencies over social values – in this case relating to job status – can further be illustrated by an incident that occurred within a Mexican tomato company producing for the US market (see Torres 1994, pp. 144-173). The incident concerned the relative value of local skills and knowledge versus professionalized expertise. It involved the demotion and subsequent loss of salary of a long-serving skilled worker, who had acquired an immense amount of practical know-how on the job and had risen to take charge of the greenhouse where the tomato seedlings were matured into plants. He was replaced by a recent graduate in agronomy who, before completing her university training, had worked as a secretary for the company manager.

The dismissal had been partly provoked by the worker's resistance to implementing cultivation measures that he considered ill-advised, and partly by the manager's commitment to 'modernizing' the organization of the company. However, after three catastrophic agricultural seasons – attributed in some way to the ineptness of the new agronomist – the skilled worker was recalled to take over the running of the greenhouse. For his part, the worker made it a condition of his reinstatement that he receive the same salary as that of the agronomist! After negotiations, the company had no option but to accede to his demand. In this way the worker's widely acclaimed status as a 'knowledgeable' tomato worker led to a reevaluation of his worth in the eyes of the company manager, resulting in his receiving the status and salary of a formally trained agronomist.

Although at one point the manager attempted to reinforce the worker's dependent position in the hierarchy of farm tasks and responsibilities, stressing that his original contract defined the working conditions and level of remuneration that he could expect, in the end they agreed that the price (or value) placed upon his skills should be set at a level much above that commanded by his formal qualifications.

This example brings out the importance of examining the sets of social relations and discursive strategies involved in attempts to fix certain shared values and develop modes of accommodation between opposing moralities or interests.

A further dimension that needs analysis concerns how actors' diverging values and interests are knitted together to construct workable social arrangements. As Callon and Law (1986) have shown, this involves both

an appeal to 'higher' authorities and the use of discursive and practical strategies for enrolling others and thus mobilizing support from a wider network of actors. According to them, enrolment entails translating roles, values and resources in such a way as to draw actors' interests together in the resolution of a 'problematic' situation. The actor-network that results is composed of ongoing chains of commitments and understandings made up of actors, things and representations, and lasts only so long as the arrangements remain unchallenged by members of the network.

This image of an 'actor-network' captures well the dynamics of enrolment processes but it is difficult to apply to large-scale and highly heterogeneous forms of social organization. For example, 'translating' the values and interests of all those involved in a particular food chain – encompassing peasant producers, large landowners, agricultural middlemen, agro-export companies, supermarkets and other retail outlets, and the primary consumers – into some coherent whole would seem a mammoth task for any set or coalition of actors to attempt and successfully accomplish. While food chains are often it seems assumed to generate unproblematically an international system of linkages geared to the production, processing and marketing of a specific product or products, and thus to define a common interest in a single type of product or range of products with a given value or values, this global picture obscures a much more complicated and ambiguous set of relations and values. For example, bananas grown and exported by the United Fruit Company in Central America contain within them a host of different qualities, as perceived and defined by the various actors involved, and thus function as a repository of values and conflicting interests associated with modern plantation production. It would be quite wrong to treat this network of production, commercialization and consumption relations as an integrated and coherent chain or system built upon a common framework of values and objectives.

Contests of Value: Agency, Organizing Practices and Globalization

This leads us to consider the organizing practices associated with commoditization. Here we are interested in the processes by which organizing strategies and discursive means are used to define and allocate value; or, to put it more concretely, how actors attempt to adapt to changing livelihood and normative conditions.

People are driven by images and symbols as much as by the search for material or instrumental gains. Indeed, as Verschoor (1997) argues in his study of small-scale *mezcal* entrepreneurs in Mexico, the expansion of distribution networks (including the large population of migrant consumers in the US) entails 'identity-constructing' processes whereby entrepreneurs develop representations (i.e., images and normative

schemata) of the social and economic world in which they operate and use them to ensure the commitments of producers and consumers.

Central to the study is an understanding of the difficulties faced by middlemen in establishing and organizing a loyal network of consumers. To achieve this, on each trip middlemen engage in a number of interface situations involving both their *mezcal* suppliers and their potential customers. What is at stake in these interfaces is the identity of consumers and producers of *mezcal* (as well, of course, their own identity). Does a consumer know the price range of *mezcal*? Does he know the differences in quality? Middlemen negotiate these and other questions *in situ*. At the interface with consumers, for instance, they bring a number of production elements to bear on the situation: the type and origin of *agaves* that are utilized for a specific *mezcal*, the character of the competitor's product, the 'oiliness' of the liquor, the material from which the bottles are made, the quality of the barrels in which *mezcal* is aged, and so on. The effect of these negotiations is a temporary definition of the identity of the consumer through the definition of the identity of the producer. Both identities are inscribed in the form of a bottle of *mezcal* passing hands, and which in some situations can lead a consumer to buy a bottle of 'inferior quality' *mezcal* for an astronomical price.

Likewise, at the interface between producers and middlemen negotiations go on as to the disposition of the producer: is he willing to expand his production? Does he know the preferences of clients? Will he give a larger credit margin on the next trip? Middlemen translate these and other questions by mobilizing different elements from the 'consumer' domain such as the preference for the taste of specific types of *agaves* coming from specific localities, choice from among competing suppliers, consumer perception that good *mezcal* (like whisky) should be 'oily,' consumers' preference for certain kinds of bottles or stickers, disapproval of the taste of *mezcal* aged in oak barrels, and so on. The effect of this translation is that if a producer accepts the identity attributed to him by the middleman, then he in turn will have to take on board the characterization of the different consumers. Thus taste, colour and presentation of a *mezcal* bottle, reflects, in effect, the identities of both producer and consumer: in the end, the social and technical organization of the production process is also inscribed in a bottle of *mezcal*.

Running an enterprise, then, entails entering or creating arenas of struggle that involve not only resources, markets and information but also concessions over social benefits and moral principles. In this way relationships shaped by notions of commodity – which are themselves often ambiguous and conflictive in terms of the specific rights and obligations implied – become hedged around by many other social and symbolic elements.

In order therefore to talk about contests of value, we must go beyond the elucidation of the moral and cultural underpinnings of different value

positions to isolate the particular organizing strategies employed to accommodate to, dispute or ignore other actors' interests, desires and interpretations. This leads us into a detailed exploration of issues of 'agency'; that is, how actors acquire and sustain appropriate forms of 'knowledgeability' and 'capability' in carrying out their social actions; and how they enrol others in the 'projects' they develop. And this, of course, brings us to the heart of a genuinely sociological view of commoditization processes.

At this juncture it is important to emphasize that when we talk about agency we mean more than merely the capacity of particular individual actors to monitor, evaluate and come to grips cognitively with their social worlds. The capacity to act also involves the willingness of others to support, comply with, or at least to go along with particular modes of action. Hence agency entails a complex set of social relationships, such as Callon and Latour's (1986) 'actor-networks,' made up not only of face-to-face participants but also of distant 'acting' components that include individual and organizational actors, relevant technologies, financial and material resources, and media-generated discourses and symbols. Organizing capacity – whether at the level of the individual peasant or frontline development worker, or in terms of the coordinated actions carried out by a consortium of transnationals – necessarily involves these disparate elements. How they are cemented together is what in the end counts.

As I implied above, many of the key actors are spatially and culturally remote, yet they have a significant impact through global networks of communication and information. This is an element of considerable importance for understanding how large-scale agricultural production and food systems are developed and reproduced. Indeed the spread of modern technology, new consumer demands relating to diverse and 'wholesome' products, and the promotion of an ideology of 'competition' and 'comparative advantage' – all targetted to specific production zones – owe much to developments in communication and information technology. In this manner, certain symbols and images transmitted by communication media (especially TV and videos) become central to transformations taking place in contemporary cultural repertoires throughout the world, including the constantly changing representations of the nature and value of particular commodities.

How these messages are received and processed by particular audiences dispersed in time and space throughout the world varies considerably, since local understandings and knowledge have a filtering effect on externally generated communication. Yet, nevertheless, new communication technology creates and reinforces new types of 'technically mediated' social relations which link individuals to various 'imagined communities' throughout the world (Anderson 1989; Thompson 1990). As Lash and Urry (1994, p. 307) comment, these

'imagined worlds' are made up of 'historically situated imaginations of persons and groups spread across the globe . . . [and] are fluid and irregularly shaped,' To be a member of an imagined world is of course to belong to a world inhabited by non-existent persons, in the sense that there are no persons that exactly match the qualities or profiles of those who are conceived of as being members. This does not, however, reduce the impact (or agency) of such imagined worlds: consider, for example, the enormous influence that the imagined worlds of commodity markets – and how they work – have on agricultural producers, consumers and financiers. Underlying these phenomena are a complex set of interlocking processes which involve the strategic interests, alliances and lobbying capabilities of the various actors. This, once again, challenges us to develop further our theoretical understanding of agency. We have become accustomed to visualize organizing practices in terms of the establishment of formal organizations or the operation of interpersonal social networks, but, as this example shows, organized response occurs not only *vis-à-vis* identifiable persons, via the named representatives of organizations, or collectively when, for instance, peasant producers come together to take action against some local landlord or the personnel of a state agency. It may also happen in response to more diffuse influences such as rumours of growing resistance to neoliberal measures and critiques, developed through the 'anonymous' media, of mounting environmental problems.

Concluding Remarks

Each of the dimensions explored above raises critical issues as to the ways in which certain events, goods and relationships are valorized by the social actors involved. They also draw attention to how commodity values are mediated, appropriated or contested by the various actors.

Given the complexities involved, should we not, then, leave aside the whole problem of value? If by this we mean the formulation of a general theory of social value – whether based on neoliberal, Marxist, or the newer 'green' versions – then I believe we should. But, as I have argued above, contests over social values are central to a better analysis of economic change, and essential for the development of a new agenda of research on commoditization. In developing this agenda we should no longer feel trapped by the constraining categories of political economy, neoliberalism or the new institutional varieties of neo-classical economics.

Instead we should forge a new path of research which accords due emphasis to what Thomas (1991, p. 9) has called 'the appropriation and recontextualization' of 'culturally specific forms of value and objectification,' In other words, we need to explore the ways in which 'external' notions and 'conditionalities' are translated into localized

meanings and action. This challenges belief in the universality and uniformity of 'commodity' values, whatever their cultural context, offering instead an analysis of the interweaving of social values, power and agency.

In addition to the importance of the local embedding of commodity values, we also need to address ourselves to the wider institutional framework within which commoditization takes place. Here we must give thought to how we might develop a more thorough analysis of the 'externalization' of agricultural tasks and of 'scientification' processes in agriculture¹¹ (see Benvenuti 1975; van der Ploeg 1990). Such a task could, I believe, provide new insights into the nature and functioning of larger institutional structures which so far have tended to elude actor-oriented types of analysis.

Finally, I wish to underline that the main focus of this chapter – namely a reconsideration of commoditization processes – lies at the very heart of grappling with and understanding contemporary change. Commodity values constitute the bedrock upon which neoliberal philosophy has been founded and remain the main thrust of present-day development policy.

Notes

- 1 This chapter is a revised version of a keynote lecture given at the XVI Colloquium on 'Las Disputas por el México Rural: Transformaciones de Practicas, Identidades y Proyectos' of the Colegio de Michoacán, Mexico, 16-18th November 1994.
- 2 Neoliberalism of course builds upon earlier neoclassical formulations that 'regard consumer satisfaction both as the analytical source of market prices and as the moral justification for allocating resources through the mechanism of markets.' This view contrasts with the 'Marxist' – or more strictly 'Ricardian' – producer-based theory of value that stresses how value is bestowed on things through the process of production itself rather than through exchange relations *per se* (see Goodin 1992, pp. 22-26, who compares neoclassical and Marxist versions with a 'green' or 'environmentalist' theory of value).
- 3 As will become evident later in this chapter, my treatment of commoditization focuses upon the social struggles entailed in the fixing or negotiation of value and not on the measurement of types and degrees of so-called commodity relations.
- 4 Recent work has built upon Foucault's notion of 'technologies of government' to analyse the indirect mechanisms that link the conduct of individuals and organizations to the political projects of others at a distance (see Miller and Rose 1990).
- 5 Here I am using 'livelihood' broadly to cover a range of issues relating to socio-economic alternatives and constraints. In this sense, I apply the concept equally to the problems faced by landless labourers and peasant producers as to large-scale land-owners, entrepreneurs or state officials.
- 6 See Villarreal (1994, pp. 216-221) for an analysis of how agency is attributed to institutional bodies and non-human components of social life, as well as to certain social categories, and thus shape the possibilities for social action.
- 7 By 'commoditization' we mean the processes by which the notion of 'exchange value' – not necessarily at the expense of 'use value' – comes to assume an increasingly important evaluative and normative role in the discourse and economic life of a

given social unit (e.g., household, village, region or national economy). Unlike the notion of commercialization, which addresses itself to the processes by which products acquire exchange value through market relations, commoditization is broader in scope since it applies to all the different phases of production and reproduction. Hence commoditization covers not only the processes by which goods are valued in the market, but also how commodity values and relations shape consumption, production, distribution, exchange, circulation and investment patterns, values and behaviour. For an analytical appraisal of the commercialization perspective (based on modernization theory) and the commoditization model (based on a political economy/simple commodity model), see Vandergeest (1988) and Long and van der Ploeg (1988).

- 8 For a fuller theoretical and empirical treatment of the contradictory dynamics of the domains of family/kinship and the market, see de Haan's (1994) analysis of the intersection and cultural management of commodity and non-commodity values on Dutch family farms.
- 9 See van der Zaag's (1992) interpretation of irrigation organization in western Mexico as a negotiated outcome of conflicting social interests and economic values; de Vries' (1992) interface analysis of the clash of lifeworlds and livelihood commitments between Costa Rican land reform officials and their 'unruly' peasant clients; Arce's (1993) similar study of the entanglements of Mexican agricultural bureaucrats and local peasants, in which he highlights critical encounters between external 'scientific' models of agricultural development and local people's knowledge and practice; Torres' (1994) depiction of the strategic use of irony and other 'subversive' devices by Mexican tomato workers for challenging company notions of 'efficiency' and 'expert knowledge' in the production of commodities for the US market; and Villarreal's (1994) analysis of struggles among a group of women involved in a government-initiated beekeeping enterprise over its economic and personal value to them as individuals and as a group – did it help them to create a little more personal space within their households and the *ejido*, supplement their household income, provide an opportunity for entrepreneurship and profit, or was it simply an excuse to socialize with friends?
- 10 For a discussion of the 'double-edged' nature of discourse and practice on 'peasant cooperation' and 'collective action,' which serves not only to promote sentiments of local solidarity but also to advance the interests of private entrepreneurs and an interventionist state, see Long and Roberts 1978, pp. 297-328.
- 11 The 'externalization' of agricultural tasks entails the increasing role of external institutions (e.g., credit banks and agencies of technical assistance and extension) and private enterprises (such as transnational companies) in shaping the farm production process. 'Scientification' refers to the process by which modern science and technology is increasingly used in agriculture.