

Introduction

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

Pablo, a married, thirty-nine-year-old Kaqchikel Maya farmer in Tecpán, Guatemala, walks his fields early one morning, surveying the crops and making a mental note of where weeds are hiding. Pablo farms land that has been in his family for generations; unlike many of his neighbors, he is fortunate to have more than enough acreage to supply his family of five with maize and beans throughout

the year. He has turned some of his surplus land to growing export crops — at first snow peas, then French beans, and now broccoli. The new crops are more labor intensive and risky, but Pablo has managed to make a good profit with the broccoli. He is now considering converting more of his subsistence cropland to broccoli production — he says he would like to make enough money to send his children to the Catholic school in town, to buy a truck, to expand his house.

The stories of Susan and Pablo call attention to the proliferation of hopes, desires, and aspirations that characterizes the current age of globalized commodity chains.¹ In the first case, we see the sort of late-capitalist consumption from which we may maintain a cynical distance even as we willingly and gladly participate in it.² Susan's shopping patterns are part of a life project formulated around certain desires: she wants to eat healthy and stay in shape; she wants to be ecologically conscientious, have a nice figure, and save time in the kitchen. These desires and valuations are shaped in relation to market forces, public discourses, and the changing structure of the global produce trade. Susan's life project is figured against a different set of opportunities than the life projects of the Maya farmers who grow broccoli in the Guatemalan Highlands. Yet, the year-round supply of fresh and frozen vegetables that is so important to Susan and other consumers in her broad demographic group is only possible because of the low returns and high risks that these farmers feel compelled to accept. Comforting images effectively hide the ugly truths of the commodity chains that bring Susan her food. Product packaging, for example, does not disclose that a large corporate dairy produces her organic milk or that poor Maya farmers grow her beautifully symmetric and vivid green broccoli. It turns out that the global broccoli trade is not only about material channels of production, distribution, and consumption; it also depends on the productive flow of images and ideals that condition and are conditioned by consumer desires.

If the desire to buy broccoli is in part shaped by market forces, it also, through Susan's purchases at the grocery store, folds back to reproduce the material worlds of production and distribution. This brings us to Pablo, whose walking and wishing is also driven by desire, if of a different sort than Susan's. Given the risks, we may see Pablo's desire as more of a gamble, with much more at stake. Some would be inclined to characterize Pablo as acting

according to “need” rather than “desire,” because of the impoverished conditions in which he lives. But this situates need and desire in a hierarchy laden with moral and cultural assumptions about what is good, or better, about how and why people want (Soper 1981, 1993; cf. Doyal and Gough 1991). It privileges a presumptively more basic “need” as righteous, justified, and neutral, as compared to ephemeral and fickle desire. Even taking into account his relatively meager material and symbolic resources, Pablo’s situation is not reducible to need alone. Although his circumstances are humble by North American standards, he has enough land to supply his basic subsistence needs and produce a surplus. He wants to get ahead (*superarse*), to achieve *algo más* (“something more,” or “something better”), with all the multiple meanings and attenuated risks that implies³ — goals he prefers to communicate in Spanish rather than in his native Kaqchikel. He has a stake in his heritage as a farmer and feels an obligation to carry on certain cultural traditions. But he also envisions a better future for himself and his children, a modern future that is not ironic or cynical. This future is projected with all the anticipation and anxiety that “not yet” entails (that the hoped-for “something better” has not yet arrived), even as it remains compellingly close, close enough that he has decided to take up the risky business of export agriculture in order to realize his project. Pablo’s vision of the future is built around the immediate and practical desire for economic well-being as well as the more diffuse and existential desire to participate in and belong to the global ecumene.⁴

Let us be clear: these are poor farmers, struggling every day to make ends meet and, perhaps, earn a little extra cash. Pablo characterizes his situation as *luchando por la vida*, fighting to survive. Compared to the Northern consumers who eat the fruits and vegetables of their labors, Maya export farmers in Guatemala are at a great economic and political disadvantage. The outcome of this trade (a cheap supply of produce in the United States versus a little extra cash and a whole lot of risk for Maya farmers) is not evenly shared. For farmers like Pablo, surviving, meeting the basic needs of human existence, is always present as an imperative that must be met and satiated. But there is something else at work here: emergent aspirations and affects that go beyond the daily task of putting food on the table. Export agriculture is compelling for farmers like Pablo not because it is the only way they can survive but because it plays into the desire for “something more,” or “some-

thing better,” a diffuse desire with which the average American broccoli consumer would also be familiar even if the particular desiderata differ.

Admitting that poor people might have a desire to make some extra cash is not to divorce those wants from the realities of surviving and struggling. Rather, it is to emphasize that the basic struggle to survive (“need”) often clings to desire and that desiring can not only coexist with but also feed on feelings of desperation. Sometimes the social production of desire plays into structures of power and inequality; sometimes it threatens them. Our ethnographic examination of the desires and struggles of Maya farmers might not contain the kind of resistance narrative about exploitation and inequality that we initially set out to uncover. Yet we have been pushed to more honestly and humbly consider how broccoli production becomes desirable, if also dangerous. Broccoli production is compelling for farmers because it responds to conditions of poverty, violence, and social suffering; in this way the global promise of “something more” feeds on desperate conditions.

Both Susan and Pablo are pursuing their desires against cultural and moral backgrounds that are not entirely of their own design. In this book, we trace the often opaque channels of desire that bind together Maya farmers like Pablo and supermarket shoppers like Susan. Maya farmers in Tecpán are venturing into nontraditional export agriculture as a moral project that acquires meaning in relation to the past, present, and future—the compelling sense and expectation of *algo más*. Their desires to engage in this project emerge from the dense cultural intersection of their memories of violence, their hard feelings about being shortchanged in Guatemala’s postwar political economy, and from new, globally framed modes of consumerism, imagination, and self-fashioning. But such projects—usually discussed in terms of making more money, getting ahead, raising children with certain core values, holding onto land, building community—must reconcile the generalized desire and narrative encoded in global political-economic flows with the moral values, practical imperatives, and existential demands of the local setting.

Clearly, Pablo and Susan live in worlds far removed from one another. But instead of telling a story of divergent interests and fundamentally different existences, we highlight the confluence of desires that connects producers and consumers. Globalization is a relational process that takes shape as people make and move things (and ideas) about the world, creating con-

nections full of tensions, frictions, contradictions, and hostilities, as well as sometimes fantastic rewards (Tsing 2005). We envision the global broccoli trade not simply as a material infrastructure (the commodity chain) consisting of points of production, exchange, and consumption, but also as a corresponding flow of affects and effects, with personal and collective desires manufactured along the way. Such a “global assemblage” links technologies of production with emergent forms of social life, political identities, and ethical or moral orientations (Collier and Ong 2005; M. Fischer 2003). Thus, this mode of production is also a mode of global connection within which people become subjects with certain kinds of desires—in cool Highland fields and air-conditioned grocery stores where acts of growing and eating broccoli are embedded in life projects and visions of the future. The broccoli trade actualizes a “commodity chain” linking sites from the point of origin to the point of consumption. But tracing the global is more than a matter of connecting the dots on a map, for beyond the refrigerated containers, shipping yards, and airplanes are social and existential dimensions that far exceed those material bases. In the movement of things around the world, people are already more than just abstract producers and consumers. They produce and consume for certain reasons, with certain expectations, and they depend on each other, whether they know it (or like it) or not.

We (social scientists, humans) tend to think about the world in terms of how it is divided up: there are different cultures or ways of life; there are national divisions and international alliances; there are “identities” to which we belong, selves defined in relation to Others. The global seems to be a patchwork of identities, realities, and worlds. Yet, connections inevitably outstrip all the breaks in the “global stream of humanity,” meaning that there is always at least a modicum of ambivalence, some relation to the Other (Tsing 2005, 1). Broccoli consumers do not identify with and may not even care about poor Maya farmers in Guatemala, but without their efforts—and for very little reward—the evening meal would not be the same. It is no wonder that many consumers remain ignorant, perhaps willfully so, about where their food comes from. Global food chains often depend on relations of economic exploitation and political domination. Even where consumers are unaware of the lives of producers in the Global South, they nonetheless express a silent trust in the commodity chain as a whole, not needing to

reflect on how it works in order to take advantage of it (see Bestor 2001; Shapiro and Alker 1995; Friedburg 2004).

We prefer to think about the broccoli trade in terms of a confluence of desires, a global assemblage that allows us to foreground moral and political questions and move beyond the language of need so often invoked to understand the economic lives of poor people in the Global South. Need speaks to the realities of utility and subsistence that define a basic register of human experience. Need converges with the economic language of “interests” insofar as both terms are assumed to be value neutral, a priori features of human existence that can be used to analyze economic behavior in terms of individual intentions, rational calculations, and sovereign choices (see Mitchell 2005; Ruskin 1862b; Sayer 2004).

Our key concept is desire, or rather the process of desiring. In our ethnographic and pragmatic approach, desiring refers to how and what people want; simply put, desiring indexes what is important and meaningful for individuals. Desires are socially shaped, inflected with cultural meanings and logics. Yet, desiring is different from “interests,” in that it is a collective process, and it is different from “needs,” in that it is historically and culturally contingent. Desiring also differs from “agency” in that it emphasizes the production of wants and not just the practices needed to achieve a desired end; thus, we focus not only on *what* Maya farmers want but *how* they want (and are left wanting). The material dimension of “economic well-being” (Goldin and Asturias de Barrios 2001) must be understood within the broader dimension of social experience and existential well-being that cannot be reduced to “need” or “interest.” Thus, we show how broccoli producers and consumers are connected within a common process of desiring, even though there are contradictions between these two ends of the commodity chain. There are ethical and political stakes in this framing and it is vital to acknowledge that there is more than an opaque financial trail surfacing in invoices and bills of lading that link broccoli consumers and producers. There is also a relationship that goes beyond the basic organizing factors of the broccoli trade and makes distant worlds interdependent and mutually constitutive. It is our hope that in recognizing such a connection consumers of produce in the affluent North will come to see themselves as economically *and* socially connected to Maya farmers. Consumers’ desire for cheap but perfect food might then be transformed into a desire to pay for the cost of more mutually beneficial and equitable global connections.

The Task at Hand

This project began in conversations with Kaqchikel Maya farmers in Guatemala about the rise of export broccoli production and their views on market dependency. To some extent, we found what we expected: subtle resistance and overt denunciation, cynicism and skepticism, fear and loathing. But these sentiments were intertwined with stories of hope, desire, and aspiration, belying any easy moral judgment.

This project also began in conversations with anthropologists and economists who are attempting to understand the various processes of what is conveniently, and now mundanely, termed “globalization.” Ethnographic sensibilities tend to privilege the local over the global, often assuming a broad backdrop of globalization as either hegemonic imposition into a local world (a globalized locality) or local resistance against distant market forces (a localized globality). For their part, economists—at least of the mainstream, neoclassically minded sort—tend to look at globalization from the theoretical remove of mathematical utility functions, which possess the virtue of parsimony but at the expense of considering cultural norms and collective moralities that cannot be reduced to tidy variables. In the final analysis, it is often assumed, the pursuit of one’s own self-interest works toward a greater good through the invisible hand’s transubstantiation of personal greed into public benefit.

In both perspectives what is actually going on out there in the various human dimensions of global processes—why producers and consumers do what they do—too often gets left out. The specific and multifaceted ways that individuals and groups negotiate and participate in global processes are subsumed to larger cultural narratives and the abstracted ethical deliberations of researchers and observers. The practical linkages of scholarship to social, political, and moral problems is what makes research worth doing, and yet we must avoid letting our agendas and assumptions overshadow what is most important for the people we study. This admonition is not in the interest of greater objectivity or neutrality. Rather, it emphasizes a concern with the changing moral conditions and basic quotidian structures of social experience upon which viable political alliances, policies, and workable futures are built.⁵ As Don Kalb (2005, 197) argues, “our pasts, ethnic or religious, are becoming our future now because categorical values, beliefs and loyalties, buried deeply in the imagined roots of our cultures, are taking the

place of the universalist modernisms gone awry.” In its finer moments, ethnography attends to the competing forms that desire takes at the intersection of local worlds and global flows. The existential commitment of fieldwork points us toward changing and competing moral orientations, the ongoing dialectic between perceived predicaments and pragmatic responses, and opens anthropology to what Carrithers (2005, 437) calls “a moral science of possibilities.”

What Maya farmers have to say about globalization is often at odds with both utopian paradigms of neoliberal economics and celebratory models of resistance and solidarity. They acknowledge the power of global cultures and economies to erode traditions, create new opportunities, and make life more complicated or more efficient. For them, the business of export agriculture remains compelling despite economic hardships because it is precisely at the everyday level of desiring that global processes are engaged, not at the purely cognitive level of rational economic decision making. In the chapters that follow, we offer a critique of the totalizing discourses and practices of free-market globalization, while also showing how related neoliberal reforms can have the effect of encouraging indigenous agency in certain contexts. Highland Maya broccoli farmers are better positioned than many other agriculturalists around the world to benefit from global food chains because they can hold onto their small plots, retain their means of production, and fill a gap in the global production schedule (cf. Freidberg 2004). But there are also consequences and shortchanges, the risks and letdowns that make this global connection inherently complicated and give it meaning and force. From the perspective of the Guatemalan Highlands, there are multiple effects, some beneficial and some detrimental, such that there is no absolute ground from which to make ethical pronouncements about whether the global broccoli trade is a “good thing” or a “bad thing.” We prefer to delve into the social and moral world of the farmers themselves, to learn why they find the trade compelling, despite the hardships, and how they envision the future.

Global Connections

We offer broccoli (*Brassica oleracea*), that humble and often maligned member of the mustard family, as an unlikely entrée for a study of the entangled

global connections between power and desire. At first blush, broccoli may seem far too mundane a commodity to invoke the passion and intrigue that power and desire entail. But we need not look to the genre of vegetable erotica (Garber 2002) to find all sorts of desires and symbiotic relations — some dangerous, others beneficial — in the increasingly global traffic in broccoli and the human labor it embodies.

We had originally planned to write a straightforward commodity chain ethnography of Mayan export agriculture. But the closer we got to the production of broccoli, snow peas, and other nontraditional crops in the area around Tecpán, Guatemala, the more the story shifted outward to the global trade and inward to local forms of violence and resistance in the Highlands. If we originally wanted to uncover exploitation at the hither side of the commodity chain, we found that the story could not be encapsulated in a simple narrative about exploitation. Rather, we found that we had to account for competing models of development and progress, multiple expressions of modernity, and convergent and divergent senses of what “better” means across locations. In this light, the global broccoli trade appears more as a rough patchwork of competing moral obligations and desires than a seamless weaving of material supplies and demands.

Complex webs of desire connect consumers in Nashville, Tennessee, to Maya farmers in Guatemala. The desire to eat healthy foods at cheap prices intersects with the desire to get ahead and make a bit of money. In the first part of this book, we trace a material infrastructure that links witting and unwitting American consumers of healthy foods, supermarkets seeking to sell premium produce, importers determined to expand their markets, and Maya farmers wanting a better life. We show how these desires converge and diverge along the way, creating contradictions and practical dilemmas for those involved. We look at the forms of discipline and training that are crucial to reproducing the aspiration for “something more” among both farmers and broccoli eaters. Maya broccoli farmers need to adopt production methods that involve new forms of education and training in order to meet the arguably excessive quality standards of American consumers. By presenting ethnographic data on both production and consumption, we show the ways that individual lives are mutually constituted by the global broccoli trade. We want to emphasize how the desires of Nashville consumers for cheap and perfect produce — linked to advertising, ideas of beauty, and health instructions in their affluent world — affect, and even exploit, the

desires of Maya farmers to improve their living conditions. But our approach counters the portrayal of Southern producers that assigns blame for their condition on structural inequalities in a manner that robs them of their agency. Broccoli growers will tell you about their desire to make some extra money, maybe build up some savings, increase the life chances of the family, or contribute to community and political organizing. Some want to take control of their means of production and avoid having to migrate to coffee plantations, while others speak simply of a desire to grow something different for a change. In the Guatemalan Highlands we find individuals and families who are drawn together by the basic need to survive, more than by any need to placate the consumers who will buy their products. Yet their everyday lives and plans for the future are determined not by simple neediness but by desires shaped locally and from afar.

Maya engagement with nontraditional agriculture cannot be understood apart from postwar conditions in Guatemala and memories of the violence that have shaped social experience in the Highlands. Many of the farmers with whom we spoke participated in the June 10, 2002, anti-tax protest in Tecpán, during which thousands of farmers rallied in the town square and youths burned the mayor's house and car and ran the police out of town. Pablo was there that day. He distrusted the mayor and believed that the tax monies in question would simply fuel the corruption in the town government. He was also motivated by proximate self-interest, as the tax would have cut into his already thin margin from selling broccoli. Anxious to express his discontent and eager to exercise his right to protest for the first time, Pablo went to the demonstration exhilarated. Yet he left demoralized, repulsed by the violence that broke out and deeply suspicious of his fellow protestors' motives. He had arrived at the protest cautiously optimistic about the new possibilities of the public sphere but not fully trusting in the promise of dialogue that has been the banner of postwar reconciliation efforts, but he left with a bitter taste.

Still, Pablo remains hopeful. He believes that what happened at the protest and in the meetings that followed does not so much indict the democratic system as it highlights specific problems related to how democracy has taken shape in Tecpán. The mayor was the problem, he says, not the government. He still believes that things will change in Tecpán and, interestingly, that nontraditional agriculture will be an important part of those potential changes. Because the financial returns on sales of broccoli and snow peas have not been as expected, he has come to realize that changes will likely

fall short, the work will remain compromising, and the process will be frustrating and risky. But he affirms that growing export crops is a way for Tecpanecos to take control of the means of production, establish family-oriented agricultural enterprises, and create a local cash flow that could shape municipal politics. The economic dimension of broccoli farming cannot be separated out from these social dimensions. In figuring out why growers participate in this risky business that leaves them perennially shortchanged, we must consider not simply the financial rewards and material risks but also the moral values and social experiences that have emerged out of Guatemala's particular historical context and its place in the global ecumene.

Desiring and Desire

The word “desire” has been utilized in scholarship (as in real life) as a way to think about sexuality, affective states, and consumption practices.⁶ The diverse approaches of Deleuze and Guattari (1983, 1987), Lacan (1977), and Levinas (1969) all converge on the idea that “desire” comprises a basic dimension of human existence that cannot be reduced to simple “need.” Need can be requited: one can eat to satiate hunger, and one can drink to satiate thirst. But desiring is eternal — an ongoing, future-oriented process, what Deleuze and Guattari (1983) term the “production of production.” At this basic level, desiring is not the production of something in particular, such as broccoli, but the general process of continuously making collective existence, something in which all humans share, even though it does not connote belonging and, in fact, often involves violence, exclusion, and domination. This general process plays out in concrete and specific contexts, in which desiring becomes “desire.” Broccoli farming is “compelling” for the Maya farmers we write about: it congeals various particular desires and touches on desiring in general. Not entirely immediate, the goals it embodies cannot be requited and are aimed at filling out the future, making the world new and different, attaining “something better.” To say that something is compelled is to say that “it is ‘driven by desire’ rather than by need or utility” (Massumi 2002, 108).

Our concept of desire pushes us to connect rather than individuate the desires of producers, distributors, and consumers. Whereas economic conceptions of “preferences” or “interests” are loaded with assumptions about