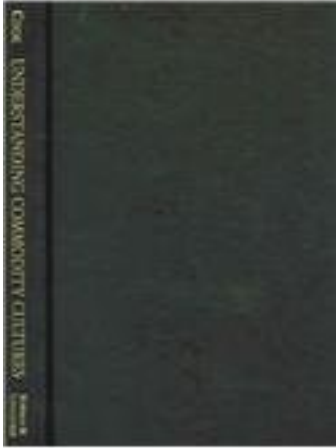


Understanding Commodity Cultures



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For the past century, the anthropological study of the Mexican economy has accentuated the cultural and historical distinctiveness of its subjects, a majority of whom share Amerindian or mestizo identity. By selectively reviewing this record and critically examining specific foundational and later empirical studies in several of Mexico's key regions, as well as the U.S.-Mexico borderlands and the new trans-border space in the U.S. and Canada for Mexican-origin migrant labor, this book encourages readers to critically rethink their views of economic otherness in Mexico (and, by extension, elsewhere in Latin America and the Third World), and presents a new framework for understanding the Mexican/Mesoamerican economy in world-historical terms. Among other things, this involves reconciling the continuing attraction of concepts like 'penny capitalism' with the realities of a world ever more subjected to continental and global market projects of 'DOLLAR CAPITALISM.' It also involves concentrating on the production and consumption of commodity value. The key concept 'commodity culture(s)' serves as a thread to loosely integrate the separate

chapters of this book. It is conceived as a way to operationally immobilize two contradictory tendencies: first, the tendency to understand an economy like Mexico's as a separate reality from its sociocultural matrix thus distorting its influence; and, second, the tendency to submerge 'economy' in its sociocultural matrix thereby diffusing its influence. This double immobilization promotes a focus on the interconnectedness of economy, society, and culture, but also makes it possible methodologically to approach themes like cultural survival, subsistence/livelihood security, use value, ecological degradation, human rights, or the sociocultural connectedness of the economy from the perspective of a commodity-focused analysis that privileges use- and exchange-value production and consumption. Such an approach provides a unique perspective in demonstrating how lived experience is informed by and shapes the diversifying funds of knowledge that enable Mexicans under economic stress to make culturally-informed choices in their material interest. The focus on deliberative decision-making, understood as involving utilitarian means-end reasoning necessarily influenced by social and moral considerations, promotes a balanced approach to the economy/culture relationship and to the role of agency in processes of economic transformation. The challenge to economic anthropology in seeking to understand processes of livelihood and accumulation in societies like Mexico with uneven development, persisting cultures of precapitalist origin, yet pervasive involvement in continental and global capitalist markets, is to deal with an unusually diverse array of capital/labor relations, as well as with significant sectors of the rural population with combined, if alternating, involvement in capitalist, petty commodity, and subsistence circuits of value production and consumption. The common denominator of this activity is deliberative choice by Mexicans regarding the acquisition, use, and/or accumulation of commodity value calculated in money terms. This market-responsive behavior, since the early 1980s, has been generated by conditions of subsistence and/or accumulation crisis in Mexico. There is an important message here that should be comforting to those in the United States who are threatened by or uneasy about the growing presence of Mexican migrants in our midst. It should also give pause to others who are quick to emphasize, even exoticize or romanticize, the cultural or ethnic differences between Mexicans and Americans. With regard to fundamental aspirations and considerations related to making and earning a living, including sociopolitical understandings, there is really very little difference between us. Too much has been made in the past of the concrete economic differences between our two countries represented in abstract, statistical terms (or in systemic terms regarding politics/political culture) as an asymmetrical First World-Third World divide. This notion of economic (and political) difference or 'otherness' has been reinforced by a conflictive and controversial history that has shaped the international border between the U.S. and Mexico, and reverberated in our respective national identities, since the middle of the 19th century. It has also been accentuated by the impersonal, instrumental discourse of international capitalist development which has made 'maquiladora,' 'indocumentado,' and 'cheap labor' household words in both countries. Against this litany of economic (and political) difference, the lesson to be gleaned from the record of study of Mexican/Mesoamerican commodity culture, from the highlands of Guatemala to the Valleys of Oaxaca or Guerrero to the coasts of Veracruz and along the Rio Bravo side of the border, is that its bearers and fashioners, the peoples of this vast region south of the Rio Grande/Rio Bravo, think and act about making and earning their livelihood just as we would in their space. It is this fundamental recognition of our common humanity that should be uppermost in all of our minds as we negotiate and struggle our respective ways together through NAFTAmerica in the twenty-first century.

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