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Halfway to Cancun: The Economic Collocation of a Peasant Community in Yucatan

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Article abstract

In defining the 'peasant', reference is generally made to an unbalanced and inferior relationship with a larger economic, political and cultural unity. The exact nature of this relationship, however, continues to be unclear. The distinct features of the 'dominant' and corresponding 'peasant' sectors and the intricacies of their interdependence must be identified and analysed in order to reach a more complete theoretical understanding of complex societies. In this article, I examine one aspect of the economic sphere of a Mayan peasant village in Yucatan. The peasant, as consumer, plays a vital role in the marketing process, a process which is a mechanism in the dependence of the local sector on the urban industrial sector.

Halfway to Cancun: The Economic Collocation of a Peasant Community in Yucatan

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In defining the 'peasant', reference is generally made to an unbalanced and inferior relationship with a larger economic, political and cultural unity. The exact nature of this relationship, however, continues to be unclear. The distinct features of the 'dominant' and corresponding 'peasant' sectors and the intricacies of their interdependence must be identified and analysed in order to reach a more complete theoretical understanding of complex societies. In this article, I examine one aspect of the economic sphere of a Mayan peasant village in Yucatan. The peasant, as consumer, plays a vital role in the marketing process, a process which is a mechanism in the dependence of the local sector on the urban industrial sector.

La définition de « paysan » fait généralement référence à une relation d'inégalité et d'infériorité avec une unité économique, politique et culturelle d'une envergure plus importante. La nature précise de cette relation demeure obscure. Les traits distinctifs du secteur « dominant » et du secteur « paysan » ainsi que les complexités de leur interdépendance doivent être identifiés de façon à permettre une analyse plus compréhensive des sociétés complexes. J'examine dans cet article un aspect particulier de la vie économique d'un village Maya au Yucatan, à savoir le rôle vital que joue le paysan, comme consommateur, dans le processus du « marketing » qui est un mécanisme de mise en dépendance du secteur local vis-à-vis le secteur industriel urbain.

The Mayan communities of the Yucatan Peninsula fall into the territory of Mexico; and as such they must be politically integrated into the nation state. The area must be penetrated. This complex and many-faceted process results in a mutual structural dependency referred to as 'integration' of the rural sectors of the polity or economy, although the original impetus for this integration comes not from the rural sectors but is defined in terms of the needs and goals of the larger whole. A cursory look at the peasant may indicate that he needs the political structure which provides the administrative, judicial, transport and communication systems on which he relies for many basic requirements and for the satisfaction of his wants. Closer examination, however, should reveal dialectics and processes, many of which can be associated with a political need by a dominant structure to conquer, pacify, govern and establish complete sovereignty over an area such as Yucatan; a need which is exhibited in the establishment of communication systems, administrative centres, general government bureaucracy and perhaps even tourist centres, in the outlying regions (Pearse, 1975).

Hand-in-hand with this political imperative is, of course, the economic back-up: the evaluation and exploitation of a region of the colony or state or continent in the interest of supplying an urban population, supporting a colonial or national super-

structure, and perhaps ultimately, feeding a national or international capitalist economy. The processes thus inferred through time and space will define the *campesino*. He is, in the Yucatan, the Mayan resident participating in an economy oriented to local and regional production and exchange and the world economy of industrial capitalism. Although the needs of the system have really determined the nature of the contact with the indigenous residents and there is a mutual structural dependency (Long, 1975), it is the peasant who is being integrated into a larger and stronger economic and political system or mode of production.

Looking at the dependence of the peasant from his vantage point, from the rural village, let us focus on the movement of goods in the market. I will present a very simple example, but one which illustrates certain processes in terms of the *vida cotidiana* or daily life of a member of a small community in the Yucatan.

In the area of a village such as Chemax, production of agricultural goods for exchange on the cash market is slight. The volume of produce flowing upward in the marketing system is overshadowed by the downward entry of needed commodities into the region and village. This imbalance in the movement of commodities is suggestive of the processes of integration of the area, and the nature of the ties of this community to the 'outside'. In this brief paper, I can only hope to allude to the fundamental contradictions of this relationship which emerge from a basic change in the economic and political autonomy of the region.

With these relationships in mind, let me invite you to a dinner in a Mayan house, figuratively speaking of course. A usual dinner menu, and I can say this without qualification, will include black beans, tortillas, fried egg and a soft drink. What significance does this meal have vis-à-vis the ties of this household with other structures? A close look will give us an idea.

The black beans are produced in the agricultural fields or *milpas* which surround the village. Most residents will be eating beans produced by themselves for home consumption. Those who have no more beans or who do not produce their own beans will buy them at a local shop, where they are sold from sacks which have been bulked at the state capital, Merida, from state production. The beans are boiled with a spice called *epazote* in a metal pot. The spice is grown in hanging pots in the backyards of most Mayan houses. The metal pots are purchased through a shop in the regional economic and administrative centre of Valladolid, a distance of about 30 kilometers from Chemax. These pots are imported to the Yucatan peninsula from northern Mexico and reach the Valladolid shops via Merida, the capital. Salt is also

added to the beans, and is regionally produced, that is, produced on the peninsula. It is packaged by a company in Merida, and is available in the shops of Chemax.

The tortillas are made from corn also grown in the *milpas* of the area. As with the beans, if there is no corn in the household, it is bought at a local shop which has either received corn for other goods in a barter exchange, or has ordered regionally produced corn in sacks from Merida, where it is warehoused. The corn is soaked in lime, the origin of which is either local or regional, to soften the skin of the niblets. Then it is either ground in a metal meat-grinder at home or taken to a *molino* or electric corn grinder which is privately owned and operated. The meat grinder apparatus is imported from an industrial area of Mexico, and is ordered through the regional town of Valladolid, to which it has arrived from Merida. The resulting dough makes great tortillas, cooked over an open fire which is burning wood collected in the nearby woods.

The eggs, likely from the chickens in the yard, or bought from or exchanged with a neighbour or relative who has chickens, are fried in lard obtained from the local butchershop. Finally, the meal is washed down with a soft-drink, usually a Coca-cola or Pepsi-cola product, from the state bottling factories, but, of course, franchised by a multi-national, *profit-making* corporation!

This dinner is served in either dishes made from gourds or *jicaras*, locally available, or glass dishes imported to the Yucatan and available from the regional centre of Valladolid.

How can this 'food for thought' be more concisely expressed?

First, these thirteen goods can be arranged as to their origins. Locally available goods are those easily accessible within the community. As corn is estimated to comprise up to 90% of the diet (Enciclopedia Yucateense), followed by beans, it is evident that there is an enormous dependence on local resources for the fundamental diet items. Eggs, lard, wood, jicaras and spices also fit into the local sphere. These are items which are not only locally produced and abundant, but which are often exchanged between households outside of the marketing institutions such as shops. If local sources of beans and corn are low, the demand moves to another level: the regional level, which includes goods available on the peninsula. As mentioned, salt and lime fall into this category. The salt industry has pre-colonial origins, of course, when trade and tribute networks throughout the peninsula distributed this commodity. Now, salt is packaged in Merida and distributed along the communications networks established during and since the colonial period. The last sphere of goods includes those which

are imported into the region from industrial areas of Mexico. These durable goods, the pots, meat grinders and dishes in my example, arrive at Merida, the 'central place' of the state and peninsula, whence they are distributed to the regional centres, such as Valladolid. Here these intermittently purchased items are displayed in the shops from which the residents of the surrounding villages come to buy or order through itinerant traders. Soft drinks seem to span two categories, as they are bottled in the regional centres, in Valladolid for example, but are produced in the state capital, Merida. The ties of this industry, of course, transcend even national boundaries and are in fact multi-national.

The fundamental economic ties of dinner to spheres of economic activity can therefore be summarised as follows. Most of what is eaten is produced locally and available locally, with connection neither to the regional or the national market networks, nor to the regional and state economic centres of Valladolid and Merida. If beans and corn become scarce at the local level, however, the bulking facilities at Merida are called upon and the produce arrives quickly and efficiently along transport lines, to Chemax. The regionally produced goods are also available in the shops in the village and arrive directly from the centre of Merida. These needs of the local residents, albeit for products available on the peninsula, are mediated through the state centre and the goods are distributed via the transportation and communication channels developed by the administrative superstructure. The small communities are, therefore, dependent on the services provided by the dominant structure for distribution of some essential products. Logically the areas best served by the communication networks will tend to rely more on the goods and services thus transmitted. Further, areas in which demands for such services are highest, can expect improved routes of transportation and subsequently schools, medical facilities, telephone lines, purified water and electricity (Ryder, 1977). In this rather dialectical process of local demand which filters up through the system, mediation of the economic and political administrative centre, and the delivery of the goods and related services, the local communities are integrated in a linear or 'dendritic' model (Johnson, 1970).

Thus, a dependence and level of expectation is fostered in the small communities; and this is even more clearly seen with regard to products for which the community must look to outside supply. As there is no local source of salt, it must be imported to the area. Salt, however, has been distributed through the peninsula for centuries by alternative distribution systems. At the time of European contact, salt was carried throughout the region by traders, who

exchanged it for meat, cloth and maize (Roys, 1965). This was a horizontal trade between regions, based on exchange relations which were defined within the social relations of an economically and politically autonomous group. Dependence on salt today is tied to integration with an administrative centre. This centre is defined, organised and operated outside of the dictation of the indigenous group. The social relations of exchange, therefore, have altered and the exchange itself is mediated not as much by a cultural definition of goods and values as by a market economy exchange system. The significance may not so much be the need for salt, as the need for the superstructure which monopolises the distribution of this commodity.

In further reference to this distribution system, let us examine the goods in the third 'sphere'. Pots and pans and dishes are industrialised products which are produced and distributed in Mexico in the capitalist mode. The Chemax household requires these items, and local or regional substitutes seem to be available only for the dishes. Dishes, in fact, seem to be prestige items, fitting into a socially defined 'luxury good' category (Bohannon & Dalton, 1965). Not all houses have dishes, many still use gourds. Of those households with dishes, there are varying inventories. Some have two dishes, others have matching sets for six. Every household, however, seems to have nationally produced enamelware or aluminum pots, and a supply is depended upon even though they are long-lasting items. Hence, there is an essential link with the economy which produced the pots, an economy outside of the regional and local spheres. This link is, in effect, an expression of integration and dependence. These items are not readily available at the village shops. The consumer must rely on the regional centre of Valladolid for access to pots. However, although the need for the item is absolute — there are no local substitutes — would a stronger reliance on the goods, hence the 'outside' not be indicated if the good was bought at the local, that is village, shops? Central place theory postulates the contrary; that 'the relative dependency of a village community on a larger trading centre is a measure of a community's integration with a larger economic system' (Johnson, 1970). The fact that the Chemaxenos are willing to look to marketing institutions beyond the community level for such utensils suggests a strong and dependent tie.

Meat or corn grinders, the final items under consideration, are also imported to the peninsula from a manufacturing centre in Mexico. They have replaced the *metate*, a rough stone platform on which women used to work the corn. The stone material for metates is available on the peninsula and was once an important trade item. This material and the trading networks have now been replaced by the industri-

alised product, the distribution of which follows the same networks from the capital city mentioned earlier. The grinders, durable items, are usually bought in the regional centre. Dependence on them is decreasing in the larger villages, where electric mills are coming into more common use.

We see, therefore, that although the most usual food items are widely available, dependence on wider structures of distribution and production is evidenced in other necessities for dinner preparation. Significant is the fact that these wider systems do not operate in a horizontal framework — goods do not move freely between neighbouring villages and regions. They are bulked, packaged, processed and distributed through a central place which is related to an economic, political and cultural system originating outside of the region. In fact, this system is tied to a distinct mode of production, which defines a distribution system founded on a rationale contradictory to the exchange relations defined by the mode of production in the countryside. The exchange network dominated by Merida is mediated by a market principle based on cash. The relations of trade, tribute, barter and exchange between and within regions are substituted by relations defined, controlled and regulated by the urban areas (Oxaal *et al.*, 1975).

We have been examining changes in material requirements and commodity distribution, but can these exist in isolation from other aspects of the mode of production? The most fundamental change is the need for cash to acquire the goods not locally available. Salt, lime, pots, dishes, grinders, soft-drinks and sometimes beans and corn are available only in the terms of the imposed superstructure — money. Money also now often mediates exchange for goods at the local level, such as eggs, wood and lard. The Chemaxeño must sell something to the market to acquire this cash.

In the Yucatan, the agricultural potential based on swidden cultivation is quite low. Production of goods for the market, or the sale of labour value in agricultural produce, is not lucrative. This is compounded, of course, by the structure of the market system, which is presently oriented to the downward flow of goods to the rural communities. Access to the cash economy is, however, readily available in the developing tourist centre of Cancun. For the past six years, demand for workers in construction and tourism has been swelling. The Chemax resident, therefore, is encouraged to enter the cash economy by selling his labour directly (Post, 1977). The impact of this type of economic tie on the local economy is drastic. The migrant workers, in fulfilling their need for cash, are radically altering the status of the community vis-à-vis the dominant structure (Stavenhagen, 1975). The implications for household self-

sufficiency, with the increasing vital dependency on the capitalist structure by a growing population of non-agricultural producers, are obvious (Berry, 1967). The contradictions which emerge, and have emerged, from these changes are embedded in an expanding demand for goods. As the mode of production changes, the basis for the role structure and social stratification of the community can be expected to adjust (Meillassoux, 1971), complemented and reinforced by a related expansion of the communication and distributive networks and increasing numbers and varieties of goods available at all levels.

In the example presented in this paper, I have attempted to illustrate a paradox in the peasant situation. Examination of a basic activity such as preparing and eating dinner initially seems to indicate a relative independence from extra-local structures. The extent of integration of the Chemaxeño is difficult to see in terms of his definition of the satisfaction of his needs. The ties and dependence, however, are there and are strong. Fortunately, the Mayan Chemaxeño has maintained, at least to the present, a surprising loyalty to and reliance on the activities and solutions defined by his community. He is perhaps expressing a reluctance to participate in the greater structure.

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