Broccoli and desire

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**Authors:** Edward F. Fischer and Peter Benson

**Type:** academic book


**Availability:** from the publisher (paper: US$21.95, cloth: US$55.00), amazon.com (used: from US$14.82, new: from US$17.37), amazon.co.uk (used: from £16.08, new: from £10.16).


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**Descriptions**

This book takes a surprising look at the hidden world of broccoli, connecting American consumers concerned about their health and diet with Maya farmers concerned about holding onto their land and making a living. Compelling life stories and rich descriptions from ethnographic fieldwork among supermarket shoppers in Nashville, Tennessee and Maya farmers in highland Guatemala bring the commodity chain of this seemingly mundane product to life. For affluent Americans, broccoli fits into everyday concerns about eating right, being healthy, staying in shape, and valuing natural foods. For Maya farmers, this new export crop provides an opportunity to make a little extra money in difficult, often risky circumstances. Unbeknownst to each other, the American consumer and the Maya farmer are bound together in webs of desire and material production (Source: Anon 2006, np link).

The authors of Broccoli and Desire have used this poetic title to lure readers into an examination of the complex impacts of globalization on Mayan subsistence farmers in Guatemala. The opening of the book invites the reader to see the threads that unite the rural farmer who grows the broccoli for markets in North America, with the average health-conscious consumer in the Kroger’s supermarket in Nashville. The premise of this book is that the threads that unite these two worlds are numerous and woven into a complex fabric, and that the impacts they have on each other are equally complex. The authors carefully carve middle ground in the debate on globalization, noting both the beneficial and the insidious impacts of the process, for both the Guatemalans, and the North American consumers… (Source: Chaiken nd link).

Fischer and Benson explore moral, sociological and historical issues surrounding the economic connection between these two groups and its roots in the victimization of the Maya people throughout history. Through profiles of individual farmers and consumers, they illustrate the stark differences between how the groups attempt to satisfy their own desires for a better life and the vastly higher level of risk the Maya must assume to do so (Source: Moran 2006 link).

The trend to industrialize agriculture has placed economists in a struggle to understand the small farm. Why do these farmers, whose labor value far often exceeds the value of their returns, stick to practices that are economically irrational and not altogether beneficial? Fischer and Benson ask that instead of examining these economic decisions as rational (or not), we explore them through the lens of desire; the compelling pull of achieving “something better”. It is through these attempts of filling gaps in our understanding of human complexities where the authors succeed in showing the difference ethnoarchaeology can make. Broccoli and Desire examines those Tecpán’s Kaqchikel Maya farmers in post-war Guatemala who have converted parts of their subsistence cropland into export broccoli production bound for the United States. The authors characterize “desire” as a future-oriented process diverting energy away from the violent past and disappointments of the present, and use of the term “post-war” implies a period ripe with promises of brand new opportunities. Thus, the book is halved into desire and its social context… (Source: Quiquivix 2007, p.198).

**Inspiration / Process / Technique / Methodology**

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 (Source: Fischer & Benson 2006, p.6).

‘The idea behind this book was to link Maya farmers with Nashville consumers who don’t know anything about each other, yet are intimately connected,’ Fischer, associate professor of anthropology and director of the Center for Latin American and Iberian

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**Broccoli**

**Auto**

**Grocery**

**Broccoli & desire**
Excerpts

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 (Fischer & Benson 2006, p.2).

Let us be clear: these are poor farmers, struggling every day to make ends meet and, perhaps, earn a little extra cash … 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 … 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 ‘something better,’ a diffuse desire with which the average American broccoli consumer would also be familiar even if the particular desiderata differ (Fischer & Benson 2006, p.3).

We offer broccoli (Brassica oleracea), that humble and often maligned member of the mustard family, as an unlikely entree 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 (Fischer & Benson 2006, p.8-9).

Discussion / Responses

Readers of Broccoli and Desire will find a fresh take on why the Maya of Tecpán, like the so-called “awkward class” of peasants throughout the globe, partake in the “irrational” behavior that is small agriculture. By connecting consumer and producer via desire, the authors’ greater hope is that when consumers in the North see themselves socially linked to Maya farmers, the North’s desires “might be transformed into a desire to pay for the cost of more mutually beneficial and equitable global connections” (p. 6). Readers may at first be hard-pressed to make the overall connection of consumer and producer Fischer and Benson have sought to outline. Only a small fraction of the study is given to the consumer perspective, so the parallels of desire are ambiguous at times. Perhaps this was deliberate. Readers are left to self-reflect and situate themselves in the Maya’s decision-making process, and map their own consumption decisions. Do consumers buy broccoli only because it is cheap? Does the exotic place of origin make it, as Fischer and Benson put it, “enticing enough to buy, and understated enough to avoid asking how producers live and why they do what they do?”(p. 45). Even an awareness of said inequality gives us options: our fair trade purchases can be linked to our desire to be better citizens of the world, but the very option of buying fair trade gives us a sense of appeasement, detracting us from fighting the system, and attracting us to work within it instead. Just like the Maya farmer, we, too, maintain the status quo within a system of limit points. It is by making parallels like these where Fischer and Benson’s attempt to move the discourse away from “us” versus “them” succeeds (Source: Quivivix 2007, p.198).

The strength of this book is the ethnographic descriptions of the economic and social realities of the Guatemalan Mayan farmers in this era of rapid social change – there is a real dearth of strong, contemporary ethnographic portraits, and this book represents a positive step to address that gap. The book also seeks to frame the discussion of this particular situation in a broader theoretical context, but at times seems to veer oddly from a post-modernist position to a more political economy approach. The long theoretical discussions make this book less accessible to undergraduates, and so I would not recommend this as a text for use in undergraduate classes, but for graduate courses on globalization, food studies, or Latin American studies this would be a suitable choice. The greatest strength of the book are the passages where the authors capture the views and ideas of their respondents, and I might have wished for more examples of this to be incorporated into the book (Source: Chaiken nd, np link).

The authors do not delve into why the Maya today opt to grow broccoli, an effort initially underwritten in the 1960s by the World Bank and the United Nations. One relationship has not changed since the 1960s; those providing services (transportation or the sale of fertilizer) always benefit from the export of nontraditional agricultural commodities, irrespective of drought or hurricanes. The “desire” component in their book offers an alternative narrative about the complex relationship between producer and consumer beside the traditional focus on commodity chains. Globalization offers the Maya opportunity, an opportunity in many ways that presents a greater reward than traditional coffee farming because the profit margins are so much larger. Most importantly, Fischer and Benson also show how the capricious consumption patterns of the West can have negative consequences on the developing world. When U.S. President George H. W. Bush declared “I’m not going to eat any more broccoli” shortly after his inauguration in 1989, the resultant firestorm demonstrated that a casual remark could have negative repercussions for broccoli growers in the U.S. and worldwide. The Maya of Tecpán that grow broccoli survived that incident, and since then have adopted strategies for and adapted to the forces of globalization. Although the format of this book may require a reader unfamiliar with contemporary Guatemala to begin with the second section, Broccoli and Desire nevertheless makes an important contribution to the scholarship of post-war Guatemala (Source: Johnson 2007, np link).

References / Further Reading

We argue that the global broccoli trade is shot through with desires of Western consumers to eat healthy foods as well as desires for Maya farmers to get ahead economically. Such desires simultaneously subvert and sustain the hegemonic constellations that anchor crucial nodes in the international broccoli trade.

References


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