

Ethno graphy

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Containing modernity

The social life of Tupperware in a Mexican indigenous village

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A B S T R A C T ■ In rural indigenous communities growing participation in capitalist markets brings changes in social and productive relations. Some authors see this as leading to the breakdown of these societies and a decline in community life. This article analyzes the ways that Tupperware containers – a Western icon of consumerism – are distributed and received in an indigenous village in Mexico, showing how autochthonous use reveals local social structures and practices in ways that question automatic causal links between modernization and Western notions of consumerism.

K E Y W O R D S ■ consumption, modernization, Mexican Indians, community, social organization, direct selling, rurality

Anthropologists working within traditional indigenous societies in peripheral rural environments have been confronting the results of accelerated processes of modernization including: increased exposure to the outside world, greater mobility, the integration of different communication media and technologies, increased access to secondary and post-secondary education, more active participation by women in the intra- and extra-domestic economies, and the multipolarity of life spaces arising from migratory flows and reflows to national and international destinations. Together, these trends have shattered the traditional community borders and

the sense of ethnic belonging. The non-indigenous world is no longer an unknown. New ways of life and modes of consumption penetrate the old. This growing participation of rural indigenous communities as consumers in the capitalist market brings changes in social and productive functions that in turn lead, according to some authors (Cancian, 1992; Godoy et al., 2005; Heyman, 1990), to the breakdown of these societies and a decline in community life. These changes are part of a wider process of globalization – understood here as the result of an acceleration and widening of the processes of social and technological change that are characteristic of modernization – that involves a continuous transformation of individuals into consumers and their progressive integration into a single market. Finding Tupperware containers in the huts of La Esperanza, a Mexican Indian village where I undertook fieldwork in January 2004, seemed to illustrate a very advanced stage of this process and I was impelled to study matters further to explore the sites and practices of the direct sale of Tupperware containers and the located consumption practices associated with their use.

The literature on the transformation of individuals into consumers (e.g. Cohen, 2003; Leach, 1993) indicates generally that increased integration in the capitalist system implies membership in the culture of consumption. More specifically, analyses of the effects of multilevel marketing on impoverished populations in peripheral rural or urban regions of the Third World (Fadzillah, 2005; Jeffery, 2001; Moutsatsos, 2001, all quoted in Cahn, 2006; Wilson, 1999) maintain that these modes of direct selling foster mobility, an ambition to accumulate wealth, and access to or contact with Western notions of aesthetics and fashionable tastes. They reframe identities as well as provide ‘the scripts and subjectivities suitable for surviving neoliberal market reforms’ (Cahn, 2006: 133).

However, as Gell (1986) shows, access to and consumption of commercial products in societies that were once relatively self-sufficient do not always reflect an inexorable process leading necessarily to the adoption of a consumerist culture and the creation of cosmopolitan aspirations. Moreover, the idea that a market economy has been brutally foisted upon an environment formerly unfamiliar with the concept of exchange value must be questioned, particularly in a society like Mexico with its highly organized Aztec civilization antecedents, characterized by gigantic markets, subdivided by specialty, which were organizing the economic life of the empire (Cook, 2006; Kirchhoff, 1943). Furthermore, the idea of societies based solely on market relations must be qualified. Miller (1995: 151) points to increasing empirical support for the idea that the ‘pure market relations presupposed as foundational to modern consumption may simply not exist, even within highly developed consumer markets’. A capitalist society or civilization founded primarily on market relations and

characterized, according to Leach (1993: 3), by 'acquisition and consumption as the means of achieving happiness; the cult of the new; the democratization of desire; and money value as the predominant measure of all value in society' would in fact seem to lie at an extreme (most likely imaginary) level of the consumerist scale. The question nevertheless arises as to how far the ideas associated with consumerism do follow the flow of goods introduced into the lives of La Esperanza residents, and how local people supplement, displace or locate these ideas in their everyday lives. Indeed, the literature on consumerism among impoverished populations in Third World peripheral rural regions generally pays most attention to the agents who are introducing the new consumerist products, their social background and motivations for change and cosmopolitan aspirations, etc. Much less attention is paid to the receptive society as a whole and more precisely to the modalities of information transferring that accompany the new acquired goods. The fact that technological and consumerist novelties are used in a given society does not imply imperatively that their users adopt the scientific or consumerist systems of meaning attendant on their origins.

The social history of Tupperware

The flow of goods manufactured outside the place where they are consumed is not a new phenomenon, nor is it exclusively linked to metropolitan capitalism (see Braudel, 1979; Curtin, 1984, quoted in Appadurai, 1986; Wolf, 1982; and for Mexico, Florescano and García Acosta, 2004). Plastic containers, as well as many other manufactured goods (made in Mexico or imported), have long been found in the remotest, poorest areas of the country. Moreover, in 1994, the importation of merchandise into Mexico received a substantial boost from the implementation of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA).

Nevertheless, Tupperware is more expensive than other plastic containers, and is seldom sold in shops but rather at 'Tupperware parties'; according to Alison Clarke (1999), who has traced the cultural history of Tupperware, a Tupperware party is held somewhere in the world every 2.5 seconds. Tupperware parties are a method of direct sales in which a hostess invites other housewives to her home for a demonstration of the products, which they are encouraged to buy. Tupperware containers, as a global product introduced to a poor rural region (where the daily wage is US\$6, when work is available) with an indigenous peasant culture that only opened up to modernization about 15 years ago, will therefore serve in this article as a paradigmatic example of the local reception and impact of an imported product that is strongly associated with a consumerist culture.

The arguments propounded by Appadurai (1986) and Kopytoff (1986)

– namely that we should approach objects as processes, analyzing the temporal, cultural, and social factors that govern their emplacement – will serve here as a conceptual basis for my analysis of the social life of Tupperware, from its global context and status as a subsumed cultural icon to its distribution and reception in the village. Adopting Douglas and Isherwood's view that '[g]oods are neutral, [but] their uses are social' (1996 [1976]: xv), I will argue that although Tupperware containers are inherently imbued with an entire, complex, urban consumer culture of distant origin, following their social and cultural trajectory in the rural environment can provide insights into the differentiated and moldable ways of situating the global in the local – ways that ultimately do not engender any major change in local consumption habits. Thus, tracing the situated biography of an object within its wider context shows us not only how its connotations change according to its social and cultural background (see, among others, Phillips, 2006; Watson, 1997), but also how the indigenous use of this specific product can reveal local social structures and practices – in short, the social fabric – that seem to temper the cause-and-effect relationship between modernization and consumerism, impeding (so far) the creation of the 'perfect global consumer'. Rather than the agents of change or the new imported products in themselves, it seems that it is the available information about these goods and their associated connotations which are pivotal to particular consumer practices. If the latter are not imported, then local sets of values are not replaced.

The few studies dedicated to the social phenomenon of Tupperware (Clarke, 1999; Peven, 1968; Rapping, 1980; Vincent, 2003) and direct sales organizations in general (Biggart, 1989; Davis, 1973) focus essentially on the company's sales method in itself and often fail to mention the receptivity of these products among consumers. As an anthropologist studying the ways that social change is perceived within an indigenous community, I am interested in the role that these global products play when they arrive in the village. Nevertheless, the spread of Tupperware in a specific social environment seemed, *a priori*, integral to the product itself and its special sales method.

On a purely functional level, Tupperware is simply lidded plastic containers that are used for storing and/or serving food. However, the *Toper* (as they are known locally) also have, like any other object, a social history anchored in the cultural sphere where they are located (Appadurai, 1986). Tupperware is currently found in many kitchens around the world, and this trade name has become a generic name for any plastic container of this type. The origins of the product date back to the end of the 1940s, when the American war industry promoted technological advances in the manufacture of plastics. Later, these advances provided the foundation for engineer Earl Silas Tupper's revolutionary invention of polythene-based

plastic containers for domestic use.¹ The hermetic lids of these containers allowed food leftovers to be kept fresh, saving money and keeping the kitchen clean. Tupperware not only represented an innovation in technology and design,² but was also marketed in an original way, through direct sales. This model allowed many women to enter the labor market by developing a lucrative occupation outside the home.

Only recently, and in specific locations in major cities, have Tupperware containers become available for sale in stores. They are still sold mainly through demonstration sessions held by company representatives. These sessions, called ‘Tupperware parties’, are held as friendly get-togethers, predominantly female, in the home of a voluntary hostess. In return for their hospitality, such hostesses receive a few containers as well as prizes based on the number of sales made and future meetings organized by the invited guests.³ Tupperware is marketed by a network of distributors, area managers, and saleswomen. These enterprising women do not necessarily have any training or expertise in the field. For most of them these sales represent an increase in income while permitting them to continue their domestic tasks. The distributors and area managers buy the products wholesale from the company and reap the profits from the retail sales. They also receive commissions from the sales made by the saleswomen they themselves have recruited. This type of pyramid sales organization provides an incentive to expand the network of saleswomen, who in turn generate further commissions.⁴ Through this organization of direct sales via social networks, which was originally a great innovation, the company soon became an economic empire.⁵

This exclusively domestic sales method is inextricably linked to the product itself. For the company, the advantage of this method is that it generates no sales costs,⁶ and takes advantage of existing social relations, since sales are made through networks of the friends, relatives, and neighbors of the distributors, area managers, and saleswomen themselves. The marketing strategy, very evident in the sales catalogs, consists in conveying the idea that Tupperware helps maintain the domestic budget. The product is promoted not only on the basis of its material qualities – that it keeps food fresh and reduces waste – but also on the basis of the opportunity it offers to earn extra income by becoming a saleswoman (Vincent, 2003). At the same time, the company claims to put commitment to its staff above the demands of competition or bureaucracy (Biggart, 1989). Thus, distributors or promoters, area managers, and saleswomen have a close relationship, meeting at least once a week to coordinate sales on the local level. Moreover, the company organizes periodic meetings to train and motivate its staff, as well as annual assemblies (‘Jubilees’) at which successful saleswomen are publicly recognized and materially rewarded with substantial prizes. The persuasive techniques of involvement and the ritual construction of loyalty used at these assemblies to indoctrinate company staff are similar

to the techniques of religious rebirth employed by charismatic evangelical groups (Biggart, 1989; Cahn, 2006; Peven, 1968). Consequently, more than simple containers, Tupperware has become a cultural icon of the West, symbolizing white, middle-class, and domestic femininity. Tupperware simultaneously represents a product, a company, a strategy, and an image associated with the company (Clarke, 1999; Vincent, 2003).⁷

Since the mid-1990s, four-fifths of Tupperware revenue has come from its 100 markets outside the United States (Hilsenrath, 1996, quoted in Cahn, 2006). Tupperware has been developing international markets, Mexico among them, since the 1950s. However, sales in those markets were confined to the urban middle class (Clarke, 1999). At the end of the second millennium, Tupperware defined the populations among which the company could expand its global market as 'less developed economies that are generally characterized by an underdeveloped retail infrastructure, limited earning opportunities, and a strong family culture – all of which offer a network of prospective sellers and customers for direct selling firms like Tupperware' (Tupperware archives, 1999, quoted in Vincent, 2003: 192, n.18). Thus, the company is interested in societies that are undergoing economic transition and have reached some degree of market development, but where social relations have not been much affected by commercialization (Vincent, 2003).

La Esperanza

In the last 15 years the process of modernization in Mexican rural areas, as well as the advantages offered by NAFTA, has attracted many national and international companies looking for new markets. At the same time, part of the rural population is now more mobile and has a little more money, encouraging the marketing of new products in regions previously characterized by a certain level of stagnation. This is the case in the Huasteca, a tropical, subhumid region in northeastern Mexico that has long been bypassed by development, whether in infrastructure, agricultural methods, or population movements (Ariel de Vidas, 1994). In the middle of this region is the district of Tantoyuca, which ranks in the top quarter of the most marginalized in the country.⁸ However, since the beginning of the 1990s, generalized trends resulting from modernization, globalization, and migration have begun to affect the inhabitants of this area as well, particularly its native populations (the Nahuas and the Teeneks). These trends have engendered crucial changes in local economic organization in the Nahua Indian village of La Esperanza (in the district of Tantoyuca), where I have been doing research since January 2004 on indigenous identity in the context of accelerated modernization.⁹

The Nahua village of La Esperanza is linked to the Tantoyuca municipality, 20 kilometers away, by either a sporadic transportation service or half an hour's walk over an unpaved road leading to a slightly bigger village located on the federal highway, with more or less regular transportation to the municipal center where goods are bought and sold. The village has had electric lighting since 1993, but still lacks running water, so the inhabitants get their water from wells and the nearby rainwater collection pond. The introduction of electricity compelled even the most reluctant to make economic adjustments in order to integrate into the wider system. While previously agriculture based on slash-and-burn methods had been the mainstay (although not the sole component) of the local economy, producing two crops of maize per year, the villagers now needed a regular income in order to pay the electricity bill, and therefore developed a market economy. Most of the inhabitants of La Esperanza are peasant farmers (cultivating primarily maize for their own consumption, with occasional surpluses) who own a few cows; some rent their fields to cattle raisers. Those without land work as day laborers, and a few better-educated residents are teachers or professionals. Adults over the age of 30 are usually bilingual (Nahuatl and Spanish), although the Nahuatl of the younger inhabitants is passive. Nowadays children are addressed only in Spanish. In fact, when, in 1985, the inhabitants of La Esperanza petitioned the federal education authorities for a local primary school (since at the time children had to walk an hour to the closest school), they insisted that instruction in this school should be in Spanish rather than Nahuatl so that they 'could become civilized'.

The local community actually began to open up to the outside socio-economic world in the mid-20th century, when a very bad drought forced the local men to seek work outside the region. Thus began the flow of migration, essentially in search of seasonal agricultural work that could be done during the village's own slack season, so that the villagers could continue to maintain their own farms. Some young people of the following generation sought work in the large cities in the center of the country, but it was not until the early 1990s that young people (male and female) began flooding to the north in search of work at the assembly plants along the United States border.¹⁰ As a result of this mass emigration out of the village, most of the 42 households that make up La Esperanza have on average three emigrants per family. In short, 165 inhabitants reside here permanently, while about 50 of the village's young people live somewhere outside the village. At the same time, in addition to the money that the emigrants occasionally send home to their parents, the people of La Esperanza now benefit from various institutional programs offering support to low-income populations in the fields of education, production, health, infrastructure, etc. Thus, far from being a closed, self-sufficient community, the people of

La Esperanza have been part of economic and social life at the regional and national level for more than 50 years, although this has not shielded them from the extreme poverty and marginalization they suffer.

While the villagers continue to observe traditional customs reflecting a particular shared cosmogony (periodic rituals honoring the nearby mountain and offerings to the earth, traditional healing methods, etc.), their material practices now also include modern technology of various kinds. Many homes have televisions, and a few people drive cars, use mobile phones, connect to the Internet (in Tantoyuca town, since there are no telephone lines in the village), and travel regularly to other places. The majority of homes in the village have refrigerators, but most food is still cooked on the open hearth (Figure 1), necessitating daily trips to the *monte* (bush) for firewood. Nevertheless, even though this kind of hybrid material modernity in the Mexican countryside has become commonplace, I was surprised to find those icons of Western culture, Tupperware containers, sitting next to the *guacales* and *jícaras* (calabash bowls) in the rustic kitchens of the village, where running water is still badly lacking (Figure 2).

I discovered that these *Toper* had been bought from Irene, a 36-year-old teacher and mother of four, a native of La Esperanza who sold the



Figure 1 A corner of one of the village's kitchens.



Figure 2 Tupperware containers in a village kitchen.

containers throughout the countryside. Since Irene is the daughter of one of my ritual kin in the village, making contact with her was relatively easy, and I was quickly able to enlist her assistance. Irene studied in Poza Rica, a major regional center four hours' drive away, and it was there that she had discovered Tupperware. According to Irene, other people who, like her, had lived for a time in the city and then returned to their home villages recommended these containers to their relatives and neighbors.

Irene's story

In this impoverished region of the Huasteca, Tupperware saleswomen are often ambitious teachers like Irene who earn only modest monthly salaries (equivalent to ± US\$300) and therefore look for ways to supplement their incomes. There are few other opportunities in the area. A diligent Tupperware saleswoman can definitely boost her family's income, which is why many husbands provide assistance with account-keeping or delivering merchandise.

Irene works with a female distributor based in the town of Naranjos, 20 kilometers east of her home, who supplies her with new containers each week and collects payment for the previous week's sales. Each week Irene receives a package of 25 containers, worth US\$120, which she will sell for US\$156. Her profit is thus US\$36, plus occasional prizes – for example, a set of two saucepans and a frying pan with lids, or a 12-piece dinner service, or a set of towels. Since these prizes are in merchandise rather than cash, costing the company virtually nothing, Tupperware vendors are both exploited and manipulated (Rapping, 1980); but as we will see, Irene has found a way to profit from this situation. For those who sell more than US\$1000 worth of merchandise, the rewards are more substantial: electric fans, DVD players, blenders, and dining-room furniture. According to Irene, the hardworking Naranjos distributor (who occasionally arrives at Irene's house at 11:00 pm) has achieved a high level in the Tupperware distribution hierarchy. She drives a company car, of a model that varies with her sales level (the minimum to qualify for a car at all is US\$10,000 a month). She also wins trips – again, based on sales levels – and she has been to the Cancun resort and even abroad to France, bringing a souvenir back for Irene in the form of a small replica of a 'steel tower they have over there'. The Naranjos distributor answers to the company office in the port city of Tampico (three hours' drive up north), and Irene thinks that the containers are shipped there from Mexico City (400 kilometers to the southwest, an eight-hour drive).

Unlike the Naranjos promoter, who organizes Tupperware parties in her urban environment and generates corresponding profits, Irene works in an impoverished rural setting. 'These types of meetings are for the rich,' Irene told me, 'people in the country don't have time for that, they don't have much money, and anyway, it's not their custom.' Accordingly, Irene sells Tupperware on an individual basis through personal contact with relatives, neighbors, and friends in her own village, in her social and work environments, and in the surrounding communities, using sales strategies adapted to the context in which she operates. The company is well aware that this kind of one-on-one selling diminishes potential profit for the saleswoman, hastens her retirement from the business, and in general reduces sales (Tupperware report, 1998, quoted in Vincent, 2003). However, covering a radius of about 30 kilometers, Irene has been visiting the surrounding villages for several years. In doing so, she joins many other peddlers in the region who daily offer their small surpluses for sale – pumpkins, cheeses, oranges, bananas – in a routine known locally as '*ranchear*' (going from one hamlet [*rancho*] to the next to sell goods). Some people, mostly school-teachers, also sell cosmetics and cheap jewelry, or even cars (from catalogs) from village to village.¹¹

Although these peddlers, like Irene, are for the most part locally born,

itinerant sellers of another category come from farther away. They offer merchandise that is produced elsewhere and is difficult to transport without some means of locomotion: wooden tables and wardrobes, dishes, saucepans, large aluminum or clay pots, *lavaderas* (cement laundry tubs), *metates* (basalt grinding stones, used to grind *nixtamal* [corn softened with ashes or a lime bath that removes the hard shells of the kernels] into *masa* [dough] for tortillas), etc. Often such goods are bartered for, with payment being effected in the form of hens or turkeys.¹² Door-to-door (or hut-to-hut) sales are thus nothing new in the region. The innovation consists rather in the fact that certain products that were previously non-existent or unknown in the area are now being sold locally in this way. The question, however, is whether these new products are being used and signified the same way in the village as in the city.

The monthly catalogs of Tupperware products that Irene distributes in the region list containers for storing foods that are not necessarily familiar to local residents, or at least not consumed by them: asparagus, artichokes, lettuce, cauliflower, Brussels sprouts, paella, pizza, fish, etc. Thus, a certain divide exists between this rural world and the urban one from which the goods arrive. Some products fail to arouse any interest – for example, the double colander which, according to the regional promoter, had lately been Tupperware's best-selling product in the United States. Apart from its relatively high price (US\$15), its function of drying fresh fruit and vegetables is of little use to local residents, who eat their vegetables cooked, and consume fresh fruit mainly in the form of juice. Another unpopular item is microwave containers with ventilation valves that permit steam to escape. Such products interest no one in a region where no one uses microwave ovens; and, moreover, ants get into the container through the valve. The climate in this area is humid and tropical, and the houses, whether made of industrial materials or *otate* (bamboo), do not normally have glass windows; accordingly, kitchens are vulnerable to rodents, small lizards, and insects. Another product, in contrast, the 'thermal shakercup' (US\$9.50), has aroused more interest, since it can be used to make the foaming cocoa shakes that are traditionally drunk during the All Saints holiday in November,¹³ saving tiresome labor with the customary wooden beater. Sometimes a product will be diverted from its original function. An example is the grater (US\$12), originally designed to grate cheese. However, in villages that still do not have electricity or in homes without blenders, it is used instead to grate tomatoes, pumpkins, papayas, and the like for the preparation of juices and sauces.

While in the urban environment consumers want containers with novel designs (according to the Naranjos distributor), in the villages the greatest demand is for tubs, jugs, glasses, lunchboxes, and breadboxes – all with hermetic lids. Local housewives recognize that Tupperware is of much

better quality than other plastic containers found on the market: 'These don't break and the lids don't crack ...'. Tupperware is also used for storing sugar, since the well-sealed lid keeps ants out. Thus, the main concern of village housewives in the region seems to be that the containers close well. 'The fat doesn't spill ... because there is no fat!' one woman said of the *Toper*, alluding at the same time to the poverty in the area. When children take *mole* (a thick stew prepared with chili sauce) to school or kindergarten, it does not spill, nor does soup when taken to a feast (Figure 3) or to husbands working in the fields. And coffee can be securely taken to the bush in a sealed Tupperware tumbler as an offering to the earth (Figure 4).

These examples clearly show the limits of new and foreign product expansion. As Leroi-Gourhan (1945) pointed out, material innovations are adopted only when they answer a certain need, fulfilling a function that already exists in the receiving society, or performing a role that deviates from its original application. In the same vein, referring to the colonial Indians' adoption of material culture and technologies imported by the Spaniards five centuries ago, Foster (1960) stressed the fact that the local populations adopted only those innovations they found useful, generally when there was no indigenous counterpart or the indigenous version was technically inferior. Nevertheless, as will be shown, Tupperware's reputed



Figure 3 Bringing food in Tupperware containers to a communal feast.



Figure 4 The Tupperware (top left) here contains coffee as an offering to the earth.

material qualities, which justify their relatively high price (on average three times more expensive than other common plastic containers), appear to be only one aspect of the role that Tupperware transactions play in local sociocultural life.

Another advantage of Tupperware is that the ability to buy containers on the spot saves the buyer a trip to town (about two hours round trip) and the subsequent return (including a walk of at least 30 minutes from the nearest bus stop) laden down with bulky packages. Accordingly, to encourage her customers and facilitate economic access to the Tupperware, Irene sells them in installments. Her agenda includes home visits in neighboring hamlets to demonstrate the products, and repeat visits to her clients: here to collect the equivalent of a dollar, there 50 cents, until the total debt has been paid. The saleswoman is received in accord with local hospitality

norms – that is, she is offered a soft drink or coffee and some type of food, depending on the time of the visit. She and her hostess then chat for a while about common acquaintances and relatives, the children of both women, local happenings, gossip, etc. ‘You have to have a lot of patience working with people from the villages,’ Irene told me after I had accompanied her on a visit that lasted some two hours. I should mention that the subject of payment was not brought up until just before we left, and even then only part of the debt was paid.

However, Irene’s visits are not made solely to collect debts. In this local society, paying visits is a way of marking the array of one’s social relations, thereby gaining prestige. Receiving and returning visits, as well as enlarging the circle of homes visited, is a way to honor and perpetuate social ties with others, acknowledging and reinforcing them. Irene and the other sales-women are actually taking advantage of their local social setting; and their sales, which may eventually increase their incomes, certainly increase their social capital. Hence, the visits made to sell Tupperware or to collect payment are not really comparable to the sales made by the other itinerant vendors mentioned previously. Those peddlers are not necessarily known to their customers, and their products, often perishable, may have to be sold quickly before the day is out. This situation does not lend itself to leisurely conversations, and the transaction, purely commercial (although it may involve barter, as mentioned), is conducted on the doorstep and has no social dimension.

Despite the social ramifications of the Tupperware system, Tupperware is still a completely capitalistic company and Irene must punctually pay her distributor the entire price of the products she has received. If she does not pay on time, she is charged interest. Fortunately, Irene’s modest teacher’s salary gives her a limited capital ‘safety net’ that allows her to pay the distributor before she herself has been paid for the same products. Irene is also very enterprising by nature and enjoys selling, so on weekends she runs a market stall in her village, selling clothes and toys. In addition to these weekends at the village market, Irene and her husband (who is also a teacher, and owns a van) take their stall around the region to village fairs celebrating local patron saint holidays. At her stall, Irene sells not only any Tupperware she has not managed to sell through personal contacts, but also the products that she receives as prizes for her sales, thereby making a little extra income. Irene also tried to recruit several other young women in La Esperanza as saleswomen (for which she would receive commissions as well as prizes for recruitment). However, the women she approached were not very interested, since they would have to put money ‘up front’, while their customers would only pay ‘little by little’. Thus, the Tupperware business requires both a certain entrepreneurship spirit and some capital investment – requirements that, for the moment, not everyone can meet.

At the same time, Irene has developed other strategies, some of her own devising, some inspired by Tupperware policy, to generate additional income from the containers: *razpazos* (scratch cards), the *tanda* (a rotating credit association), and bingo. She buys the scratch cards from the Tupperware Company for US\$2 each and sells them for US\$2.50, keeping the difference between the wholesale price and the retail price. The purchaser of a scratch card may win a specific kind of Tupperware container depending on what appears when the card is scratched. The objective of the *tanda* (Irene's own initiative) is to gain temporary use of the total sum of a common savings fund. For example, a group of 10 teachers would each receive a number after contributing US\$20 to the fund, while Irene herself would add a packet of Tupperware 'leftovers'. Each week there is a drawing, and the winning number receives the money and the packet of containers. Irene benefits by having the management of a relatively substantial sum, which she can invest in the purchase of new products.

The bingo game is a lottery organized by Irene, in which each player pays US\$5 and the winner takes the pot – or at least this is the original Tupperware formula; but Irene has adapted it to the local ethos. At a bingo party I attended in La Esperanza (Figure 5), about 15 adults, men and



Figure 5 A bingo-Tupperware party in the village.

women, gathered around a table under a large tree in the center of the village. A second table next to it held about 20 Tupperware containers of different sizes and shapes. Irene began the game by explaining the rules. She told us that whenever we completed our bingo cards we should say, 'Bingo Toper!', and explained that 'bingo' was the English word for the Spanish '*lotería*'. However, she added that if we preferred, we could use the Spanish term. Naturally everyone opted to use the more familiar Spanish word. Irene explained that we could also choose between two ways of winning the game. One way was that the first person to complete a card would receive all the prizes on the table. The other way was that everyone would get a chance to win one of the containers. This way meant that the game would last much longer and that no one would win a very substantial prize. Nevertheless, the players decided unanimously to give everyone a chance to win something, even a very small container that was not worth what they had paid to participate in the game. Moreover, those who won first stayed to the end of the game, playing for fun, to keep the other players company until they, too, won their own Tupperware containers.

Being part of the society in which she is trying to sell, Irene is sensitive to the local values of consensual decisions and fairness. Although she represents a capitalistic enterprise, she is willing to spend time to ensure that local conventions are respected and everyone is satisfied. Thus, not only has Irene adapted her sales strategies to the company's pressure for payment and her own moneymaking ambitions, but she has also tailored them to the local *convivencia* (norms of coexistence). Local residents invest less time in moneymaking than in sociability, which is the core of village relations. In this case and others mentioned in this article, we see that even though the company itself designed its sales strategies on the basis of certain principles, their sociocultural 'foreignness' in the rural socioeconomic environment where Irene was working ultimately forced her to adjust them to local conditions.

The local integration of Tupperware

Let us return to our initial questions concerning possible changes resulting from the introduction of exogenous consumer goods and sales practices. Citing Karl Polanyi's analysis (1944), of the development of industrial capitalism and the profound social transformations suffered as non-contractual organizations like kinship and the neighborhood were suppressed to permit the individual freedom necessary for the transition to capitalism, Biggart (1989) has argued that the Tupperware case, on the contrary, represents a global capitalist company transforming social relations into a lucrative network (an 'organizational parasitism', according to Taylor, 1978: 574).

Biggart (1989) asserts that the rationale of direct sales organizations is to operate through social institutions and conditions, not in spite of them. Networks of deep, dense, and geographically close kinship are thus ideal for the organization's purposes of economic exploitation.

Seen in this way, social relations are not obstacles so much as a means of recruiting saleswomen and clients (often the same people, in places like La Esperanza); blood relatives are also neighbors, or, if not, ties of ritual kinship or *comadrazgo*¹⁴ round out the relationship. The purchases of *Toper* from Irene in La Esperanza reflect underlying rules of reciprocity, a sense of obligation that is even stronger in sales conducted within a closed social circle where social distance is minimal and everyone knows each other. In the village, then, transactions are conducted within a pre-existing regulatory framework of daily social contacts with neighbors, relatives, and friends – a framework implying the flow of reciprocity that characterizes all close social groups (Davis, 1973). Accordingly, direct sales organizations seem to be more successful in countries (such as Mexico) offering less social protection, where more importance is placed on family networks and informal sectors (Biggart, 1989). Thus, Tupperware fits into local social structures, and this strategy of interpenetration between the social and the economic (capitalistic) is an integral part of the Tupperware marketing system. But does this introduction of exogenous distribution and consumption practices into the local social fabric have any fundamental influence on that fabric? A particularly important question is whether the individual system of Tupperware sales in the villages actually empowers the women involved, by the fact that this system provides – in addition to extra income for the saleswomen – an opportunity for play and socializing for everyone.

In this respect, it should be mentioned that the introduction of Tupperware into the rural environment of the Huasteca coincided with a historic silent revolution in the rural communities. Basically, for the last 15 years, governmental policies of assistance to the poor ('*Progresá*', '*Oportunidades*') – breaking with previous policies that directly supported agricultural production (through men) – have focused on supporting consumption instead, by paying cash directly to female beneficiaries (see Lind and Barham, 2004). This change has transformed the status of village women, since they now manage a budget that is not dependent on the income generated by their husbands, they have to leave their homes to go collect the money at the municipality, and they are accountable to disbursing institutions outside the village for their management of this money. At the same time, the young people who leave the village to find work do not return to start families of their own, and this, together with the family planning that has been common for the last 10 years or so, has brought a decline in the number of children in the area. As a result, families have fewer mouths to feed and consequently more time (and a little more money) for social life

and consumption. The fact that many husbands are also away from the village looking for paid work gives women still more social and economic freedoms. For example, they now speak in community assemblies on behalf of their husbands, they organize committees for community projects, and so on. This new situation undoubtedly offers local women a status in their own right, in the public as well as the private sphere.

Nonetheless, the network of feminine social relations underlying the Tupperware sales system does not automatically make Tupperware a feminist organization, and the very fact that women are being sold what is, after all, a domestic product is a good example of the traditional role still assigned to them, a role that is not questioned by the women themselves (see Rapping, 1980). The fact that sales work affords some of them some extra income does not change their role as housewives, and that income is ultimately spent on the house and the family (see Vincent, 2003). To some extent, this situation reflects what Hochschild (1994) describes as the abduction of feminism by the (commercial) culture that accompanies advanced capitalism and that governs personal relations. Yet all the 'self-help' and 'entrepreneurship' rhetoric that is part of the recruiting and training strategies in this kind of multilevel marketing (Cahn, 2006; Wilson, 1999) does not appear to have attracted the saleswomen that I interviewed, perhaps because attending motivational meetings involved traveling to larger cities a considerable distance away – meaning both an expenditure of money and time, and contact with a social environment that would be alien, urban, and non-indigenous. Moreover, as we have seen, the earnings from Tupperware sales are not very substantial, and in fact cannot be, given the limited purchasing power of the potential customer base in this region and the foreseeable saturation of the market for *Toper* there. The sales-women I met do not move out of their immediate social environment, because they have no way of gaining access to other markets. As a result, although these women develop other strategies for reaping benefit, recycling their sales prizes in the market, as Irene does, the introduction of new products and selling methods has not brought any radical change to the social habits of consumption. Thus, although the Tupperware system implies urban-engendered innovation in sales and consumption, that innovation does not effect any appreciable change in either the traditional division of labor or the means of socialization, and consequently is integrated smoothly into the rural environment.

Irene and the other saleswomen in her network, as well as the housewives of La Esperanza with whom I talked about the *Toper*, did not seem to be aware that Tupperware is a corporation with a global reach. Irene had a vague idea that the company headquarters were in the United States, but seemed surprised when I told her that many years ago my mother had organized a demonstration of these products on the other side of the world.

Contrary to what Besnier's (2004) Tongan informants said concerning their own participation in the market, or the vision of the 'American way of life' invoked by Wilson's (1999: 413) interviewees in Thailand, the Tupperware transactions in La Esperanza do not convey any explicit discourse on modernity. The foreign exoticism attributed to these containers did not appear to give them any added value or cachet in the eyes of the women with whom I spoke, nor were they seen as an indication of integration or modernity. Although the villagers watch television, they are not glued to the screen (since they are often busy paying visits), and what they see there, barely paying attention, is not really talked about, and is even less an object of veneration. Similarly, the closest branches of McDonald's – an undeniable icon of globalization – are probably in the two large towns at the outer limits of the region, Tampico in the north and Poza Rica in the south, both three to four hours' drive away and not often visited by the inhabitants of La Esperanza. Symbols of globalization and objects of modernist aspiration therefore have no real place in the minds of the villagers, at least not explicitly. Here we find what Appadurai (1986: 41) calls the discontinued distribution of knowledge about an object throughout its 'career'.

Even apart from all this, the villagers face a major impediment to any wholehearted adoption of consumerist ambitions: their poverty does not really allow them to indulge in the novelties offered by recent contact with the global market. This was expressed indirectly, for example, when a local version of a gourmet café was opened recently in the county town of Tantoyuca, its clientele being a small group of the non-Indian elite (basically the families of the major cattle raisers), who know all about the latest consumer trends. One day an American anthropologist who was doing fieldwork not far from La Esperanza paid me a visit, bringing with him a cardboard cup of cappuccino that he had clutched throughout his journey from Tantoyuca, where he had been particularly excited to find 'decent' coffee after his long sojourn in the field. In the village, this cup of coffee became the subject of conversation, and my colleague had to explain to the locals what was special about this beverage. But when he told them how much it cost (US\$1.50 – the cost of two kilos of tortillas, which could feed a family of six for a day), a long silence ensued. This is a poor, rural population where, despite the new (though very slight) influx of monetary resources and innovative consumer goods, people are careful with the little cash they have. In the case of Tupperware containers, they invest in products that are useful to them and durable, but they cannot afford to buy many on a regular basis.

The Tupperware Company adapts its products to the countries where they are marketed. For Japan, for example, the company designed a special container for sushi and another to protect kimonos from humidity and insects (Clarke, 1999). For Mexico, it developed containers for preparing

jellies. However, unlike McDonald's, which also adapts its products to local habits (kosher meat in Israel, no beef in India, etc.), but ultimately imposes a certain type of nutrition, Tupperware, an internationally known product, seems to have landed in the Huasteca area without its cosmopolitan aura. In the village it is simply considered a good-quality plastic container for food, and it is as such – that is, as a functional object – that Tupperware has been integrated into local social and cultural molds.

Local Tupperware parties

Despite (or perhaps because) of the general trend towards depopulation in this area resulting from accelerated migration, the social community in La Esperanza is remarkably close-knit. The inhabitants are linked by close relations of kinship (by blood and by marriage), reinforced by a dense network of ritual kinship (*comadrazgo*) ties that generate daily acts of mutual social support. Despite differences in economic occupations and income, the commitment everyone has to the community and its members is reflected formally in the egalitarian participation of all residents in



Figure 6 A community meal at the local chapel.



Figure 7 A feast in the village.

community duties (public service tasks, committees, etc.) and emotionally in the attendance of every villager at all social events and collective and individual rituals (Figures 6 and 7).

It is important to mention that these close ties are based on the fact that the inhabitants of La Esperanza own their land under the communal property regime (*bienes comunales*). In this case, that means that even if the land is divided into individual plots, it is actually owned collectively. Thus, these are community properties that, by government decree, cannot be transferred except between members of the community who are officially registered as original inhabitants or their descendants. This system of collective possession carries with it certain rights and obligations, which by their nature create a unique bond between the inhabitants. One of the main obligations for both men and women is their *faena*, the weekly work duty for the community (maintenance of public paths and local public services such as the school, chapel, well, etc.). This kind of participation in the communal social obligations, important to each resident's prestige, is also assessed in monetary terms, and if for any reason community members cannot do their share of the *faena*, they must pay the authorities the equivalent of a day's wages. This attribution of a monetary value to social

obligations also applies to mutual assistance with agricultural labor. Since the land is communal, although cultivated in individual plots, people help each other out, bringing their own digging sticks when sowing corn in the neighbor's *milpa* (cornfield) – a tradition known as *mano vuelta* (rotational labor exchange). Yet even though everyone helps each other in turn, this service is always paid for, in addition to a festive meal held by the owner of the field for all the helpers after the work is done.

The affable coexistence among the inhabitants of La Esperanza, almost all of them related in one way or another, thus does not preclude monetary transactions between the members of this community. On the contrary, people pay, or at least offer to pay (albeit a minimal amount), for any service requested (a little bunch of cilantro, a five-minute ride in someone's car, a purchase in town on a neighbor's behalf, etc.). But this practice in La Esperanza of paying for work or services is less a sign of individualism or the commodification of social relations than it is part of a social ethic that seeks to avoid the inequities resulting from monetary or moral debt.

This way of thinking is related to the phenomenon of envy, analyzed in detail elsewhere (Ariel de Vidas, 2007a). In short, in indigenous societies that are midway between tradition and modernity, envy and its corollary, witchcraft, are often linked to the accumulation of non-essential goods from exogenous sources. However, in contrast to their Teeneek neighbors in Loma Larga – the subject of a previous study (Ariel de Vidas, 2004 [2002]) – whose similar outlook resulted in the stagnation of any spirit of enterprise, the Nahuas of La Esperanza have developed a fundamentally different attitude, perhaps owing to the relative improvement in their situation of late (due to the emigration of the young and consequently the expansion of available land for cultivation and fewer mouths to feed, government aid, financial support from the young emigrants, etc.). In effect, among the Teeneek groups I studied, any increase in fortune (very relative here, too) was hidden to avoid the malevolent looks that might lead to acts of sorcery – according to an outlook that typically leveled downward. In La Esperanza, in contrast, any gain, comfort, or happy event is cheerfully shared with the rest of the community. The leveling mentality is the same as among the Teeneeks, but it takes the form of sharing rather than self-denial. In La Esperanza, the fear of envy still obtains, and when someone falls victim to an inexplicable misfortune (incurable disease, scholastic failure, marriage problems, farming calamities) the local interpretation revolves around the evil eye, but these are situations beyond anyone's control. Possible malicious actions inspired by envy of someone else's well-being can be actively warded off on a daily basis by making a point of sharing both food and happy occasions.

As a result, in La Esperanza, in addition to collective social and religious (Catholic) festivities, the family party agenda is particularly full, entailing

elaborate planning, sometimes beginning more than a year in advance, to invite people who will help with the party by contributing either funds or labor. Obviously an invitation must be repaid (financially and in labor), and as a result, the more invitations one issues, the more one is invited to other parties; and the more guests come to one's party, the greater one's own personal prestige.¹⁵ The current relative state of material well-being in the village, combined with the underlying envy system, probably explains the growth of the gift economy here. This relationship between the socio-economic and cultural contexts thus may be contributing, by another channel, to the efflorescence of the fiesta finance system described by Gregory (1987, quoted in Monaghan, 1996) just when it might have been expected to disappear upon increased contact with the market economy.

Robustness in the symbolic economy

Tupperware containers are desirable in La Esperanza because they fulfill a very useful function in the relations of exchange and mutual assistance. That is where their value lies, not in the fact that in another cultural context these objects are associated with a certain icon arising from another value system. In other words, prestige is not gained by having acquired Tupperware, but rather from using it for what it is, that is, durable containers that close tightly and therefore allow their owner to take part in the local ethos of food exchange. Thus, the consumption of these objects is not associated with competition, but rather with conformity to local norms.

It should be remembered that consumption is not the same thing as commodification, and that many systems of consumption exist and can coexist (Miller, 1995). These systems may also be combined with different systems of production that are not necessarily compatible with 'purely economic' reasoning, as is the case of the Muria in India described by Gell (1986). Bourdieu (1980, 1997), too, in his analysis of the gift exchange, cites the need to unite subjective experience and objective reality, focusing in particular on the deferment of the reciprocal gift, which, according to him, is essential to the 'social lie' that underlies the illusion of the gift's disinterestedness. In La Esperanza, the consumption of Tupperware reflects the way the gift economy and commercial transactions combine – or rather, the way that those transactions melt into the broader context of the symbolic economy that still operates in the village, although it has long been adapted to accommodate the monetary economy. Here, then, is a situation where capitalist modes of economic behavior are crossed with non-capitalistic spheres of values and exchanges based on kinship and community relations. However, my intention here is not to essentialize non-commercial relations as immutable and uniform, nor to imply that the

village is a place of radiant harmony, but rather to show the current robustness and preeminence of symbolic socioeconomic relations over the purely monetary exchanges that are nevertheless ubiquitous in daily life. This gift economy, as Bourdieu emphasizes, is a political phenomenon (see also Godelier, 1996). Thus, when the inhabitants of La Esperanza return from their visits to the United States border where their children are working in Dickensian conditions in the *maquiladoras* (bonded assembly plants) and living amid the anonymous violence of shantytowns in which 'everything has to be bought, even water', the symbolic economy and the 'reciprocal morality' (Monaghan, 1996: 513) that characterize social life in the village may in fact be experienced as a kind of opposition where the inertia of traditional mechanisms of exchange tells against more 'economicistic' mechanisms, the former ironically reinforced by the opening of the community's social and economic borders to the outside world.

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Notes

- 1 Previously people used metal or glass containers, which were heavy, breakable, non-hermetic, and not suited to storage in refrigerators.
- 2 As such Tupperware products were exhibited in the New York Museum of Modern Art in 1956 (Clarke, 1999).
- 3 For an ethnography of the 'Tupperware party', see Taylor (1978).
- 4 For a detailed description of the structure and operation of this sales model (network direct sales organization or multilevel marketing) see Biggart (1989) and Davis (1973).
- 5 The Tupperware Company was not the first to employ this sales model, but was one of the pioneers in the field (see Biggart, 1989).
- 6 Direct sales organizations began using this sales model in response to the regulatory laws of the New Deal promoted by President Franklin Roosevelt in 1935, which forced companies to pay a minimum wage to employees

and assume social costs. To avoid these impositions the traveling salesmen of these companies became contractors (Biggart, 1989).

- 7 See also the documentary *Tupperware!* by Laurie Kahn Leavitt [www.thetupperwarefilm.com and www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/tupperware].
- 8 According to data from *Consejo Nacional de Población* (CONAPO), 2000. This official body measures marginality using different parameters, based on the percentage of population meeting the following criteria:
 - Quality of housing: existence or absence of a sewage system, lavatory, running water, dirt floor, and electricity, as well as the crowding index (average number of occupants per room).
 - Monetary income of less than two minimum wages.
 - Education: number of inhabitants over the age of 16 who are illiterate or who have not completed primary school.
 - Population distribution: distribution of communities numbering fewer than 5000 inhabitants.
- 9 This research is part of a larger project involving a comparative analysis of the diverse experiences of Tzotzil and Nahua groups in the Huastec region as they integrate into modern Mexican life (CEMCA, 2004–2008).
- 10 For an analysis of the different waves of migration from La Esperanza, see Ariel de Vidas (2007b).
- 11 Such sales are usually made to teachers who form the local elite, since they earn steady albeit modest salaries, unlike most of the peasants and day laborers of the region. With their dependable although meager purchasing power, they may be able to buy cars in installments.
- 12 For a more detailed study of itinerant rural peddlers in the Huastec region, see Pérez Castro (2005).
- 13 Traditionally, the foam is supposed to introduce *aire*, or the spirit of the dead, into this beverage, which was sacred in prehispanic times.
- 14 *Compadrazgo* is a term describing the strong bond of reciprocal solidarity between the male and/or female godparents of a child and the child's parents.
- 15 For an analysis of a similar exchange system governing festivities in an Indian village in Oaxaca (Mexico), see Monaghan (1996).

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