

Book Reviews/Comptes rendus

WALSH Casey, FERRY Elizabeth Emma, SOTO Gabriela Laveaga, SESIA Paola and HILL Sarah. *The Social Relations of Mexican Commodities: Power, Production, and Place*. San Diego: Center for U.S.-Mexican Studies, University of California. 2003, 190 p.

The Social Relations of Mexican Commodities is a well researched set of studies on the regional production of various twentieth century Mexican commodities. By focusing on the production, circulation, and consumption of commodities as diverse as cotton and cultural heritage, this interdisciplinary collection examines how local social actors have engaged and negotiated circuits of capital, as well as political agendas, projects, and discourses fashioned at a distance. The authors demonstrate how such engagements of national and global processes and projects have helped constitute and define local social formations over time. Indeed, one of the strengths of this collection is the historical background and approach it provides for understanding the regional relations of contemporary Mexican inequality.

Perhaps the chapters of most interest to a general (non-Mexican studies) audience are those that explore atypical commodities that expand our grasp of what can be produced for exchange and understood as property. This would include Soto's chapter on the collection of yams used in the production of steroid hormones, Hill's chapter on garbage scavenging, and Ferry's piece on the UNESCO World Heritage site of the city of Guanajuato and its old silver mines. In the latter case, a local mining cooperative has used the idiom of cultural patrimony to promote mining tourism and charge entrance fees to its silver mines. Ferry's research on the debates over cultural patrimony in Guanajuato is of interest to scholars working on cultural commodification, particularly the question of how "heritage" is contested and commercialized. Another chapter, by Sesia, may be of interest to researchers working on peasants affected by neoliberalism and the global economy because it argues that recent neoliberal reforms have generated a retreat from the market in rural Oaxaca for certain products and a return to subsistence production –in other words, such reforms set off a process of de-commodification.

For scholars of Mexico, this collection offers a timely contribution to research on the expansion of commodification under structural adjustment policies and neoliberal reform. Although such policies are not the focus of the collection, several chapters offer insight into how trade liberalization and the privatization of state enterprises have engendered

commodification, or in some instances, as in Sesia's chapter, a process of agrarian de-commodification.

Also of interest to scholars of Mexico and Latin American studies is Walsh and Ferry's introduction. These two anthropologists situate the emergence of regional studies and Mexican anthropology within the context of the post-revolutionary project of the early twentieth century to develop the countryside by culturally and politically integrating its diverse inhabitants. They also outline the history of a commodity-focused approach in Latin American studies and argue that the Marxist informed examinations of the relations of exploitation involved in the production of everyday commodities—which are often obscured in capitalist societies—enabled anthropologists of earlier generations to examine how global capitalism affected rural societies without falling into the over-determinism and abstractions of dependency, world systems, and mode of production theories. This earlier commodity-focused approach informs the authors' own investigations of the relations of power and the production of place in modern Mexico, but the introduction also mentions more recent scholarship on commodities without elaborating much on this newer work. A shortcoming of this collection and its introduction in particular, then, is that it does not engage in any depth newer studies that use commodities as a means of studying local-global interconnections and the processes and ideologies of globalization. For such a discussion, readers may want to take a look at the special issue of *Anthropologica* entitled, "Commodities, Capitalism and Globalization" (2004, vol. 46, no. 2).

The Social Relations of Mexican Commodities follows the ways particular commodities entangle social actors in their production, exchange and consumption and how economic practices and processes are connected to historically constituted and unequal social relations. This collection nicely illustrates how the study of commodities provides a window onto the social and historical formations of power and inequality.

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