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The Buenos Aires Central Wholesale Market (BACWN): A Case of Multiple Power

MARIA LAURA VITERI

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Abstract. The Buenos Aires Central Wholesale Market is a place where a lot of social and political relationships with different degrees of power are developed. Since this market was opened in 1984, the participating actors have faced several internal and external transformations, such as the implementation of neo liberal policies, changes in the Market's administrative rules and the introduction of new actors in the retail distribution chain.

Therefore, this article shows how international economic processes and policies become embedded in local distribution systems, and focuses on the spatial and social variability, i.e. the multiplicity of local social actors and interests involved in the globalization process. The article aims at exploring the creation of the Buenos Aires Central Wholesale Market as a constructed process linked with different kinds of social and political interests and motivations. In this respect, we combined the theoretical framework of political economy and the actor-oriented approach along with different ethnographic tools. The first one helps us to analyse the macro-dynamics of the market, whereas the second one allows us to analyse how people experience global processes in this particular social space. By doing so, we studied the strategies that actors developed in order to confront changes. Since the opening of the Buenos Aires Wholesale Market, these changes have modified the degree of economic and social relevance of the Market, thus generating different degrees of power in the actors involved.

Introduction

The Buenos Aires Central Wholesale Market (BACWM) began to be built in the 1970s under the National Interest Market Act No. 19227/1971. This Act promoted the creation of a public market which could serve as an incentive to open a wholesale market network in Argentina's large urban areas. The ultimate goals were: i) competitive price formation (commercial transparency), ii) a fluent information system for producers, iii) appropriate supply to urban population, and iv) elimination of unnecessary distribution stages (Durand, 1997).

Five hundred and forty hectares were expropriated for the building project but not even half were actually used for the construction. The place was strategically located

Maria Laura Viteri is Ph.D. Student at the Rural Development Sociology Group, Wageningen University, Wageningen, Netherlands, and Reseracher at the National Institute of Agricultural Technology, EEA INTA Balcarce, Buenos Aires, Argentina. E-mail: lviteri@balcarce.inta.gov.ar.

only 2 km from downtown Buenos Aires (through a highway access), and near Ezeiza International Airport and Río de la Plata Port (through a railway access never used). The BACWM has twelve 7,500 m² large roofed pavilions and six 1,600 m² half-roofed pavilions called 'playas libres'. Besides, there is a five-store building for administration offices, a quality control laboratory, a petrol station, warehouses, a pavilion for selling fish and two railway platforms.

This huge infrastructure – created by the national government to control the fruit and vegetable commercialization – gave birth to a complex and heterogeneous social space where human and non-human components, nature and culture encountered (Arce and Long, 2000). The aim of the present article is to analyse this huge infrastructure, taking into account its creation as a constructed social and political process and how the actors involved experience a global process.

The article is organized as follows: the first section reviews different aspects of food globalization, taking into account a political economy approach and suggesting the actor-oriented approach as a complement. The second section illustrates processes of globalization through the BACWM, taking into account its creation and the daily routine of 'users'. By looking at the process of transformation at the BACWM from the actor's point of view, we attempt to open the black box of these multi-realities.

Global Food

Globalization means the increasingly liberal international production and trading of agricultural and food products. It denotes the dominance of the transnational companies, the emergence of a new international division of agro-food labour, new financial and technological relations and the replacement of national by international institutions to regulate trading relations. Nowadays, both 'conventional' and 'alternative' social food diets reflect and condition the global organization of agriculture (Bonanno et al., 1994; Goodman and Watts, 1997; McMichael, 1994; Atkins and Bowler, 2001).

According to Bonanno and Douglas (1996), despite the common understanding that food production is essentially local and exogenous to the global system of production, this sector is one of the most globalized. Several important dimensions of global are related to the strategy of maximizing flexibility. Globalization is characterized by instant communication, fractured spatial-temporal unity, concentration of financial and research capacity in few developed countries, low-cost 'global sourcing' (the main goal for firms), part-time and temporary workers prevailing over full-time employees, transnational food products without connecting to a particular country, and cultural post-modernization (Bonanno and Douglas, 1996).

Conventional nation state-based regulatory practices can no longer adequately deal with problems such as the growing distance between food producers and consumers. The role of the nation state is changing and other levels of governance and other actors are beginning to assume new responsibilities. These transitions change the traditional divisions between public and private responsibilities, nation-state structure and international coordination. Globalization is perceived as a shift of power from communities and nation states to international institutions such as transnational corporations or multilateral agencies, or even to supranational regional

political organizations (Bonanno, 1993; Bonanno et al., 1994; McMichael, 1994; Castells, 1996; Stalder, 2006).

Some authors (Goodman et al., 1987; Friedland, 1997; Stalder, 2006) consider that the specific place and time (seasons) of the production of 'conventional' food has become relatively irrelevant for the specific place and time of food consumption. The uncoupling of time and space is intimately linked to a progressive industrialization of food (replacing and substituting natural processes). By improving communication and storage and preservation technologies, food products can be transported over long distances at lower costs. For example, fresh tropical fruits are available every day in supermarkets in Western Europe and the United States.

Despite the homogenizing forces of globalization, there is also an expansion of food diversity. Some examples are expressed by fair trade, origin designation, slow food and organic food. Nevertheless, standardization and differentiation are not opposing tendencies but dual outcomes of food and agriculture globalization. Both are actually aspects of the same phenomenon (Murdoch et al., 2000; Renting et al., 2003; Fonte, 2006; Marsden and Murdoch, 2006; Brunori, 2007). Therefore, food products go through a complex and diverse set of reconstituting processes in local and global areas, increasing the diversity across space (Arce and Marsden, 1993, p. 293).

Regarding the organization of production in general, Piore and Sabel (1994) consider that there are two competing and complementary paradigms: mass production and craft production. They assert that flexible specialization and mass production are able to be combined in a unified international economy, where the old mass-production industries might migrate to the underdeveloped world, leaving behind the high-tech industries in the industrial world (hybrid system). Although this perspective recognizes the coexistence of mass and craft production, it stresses the structural differences between countries without considering heterogeneities within countries. Piore and Sabel's examples of successful geographical areas dominated by small firms are scarce (Storper, 1997). Moreover, contemporary society cannot be understood in terms of less or more advanced geographical regions (Stalder, 2006).

This scenario of heterogeneities can be illustrated with case studies of undeveloped countries like Argentina. Globalization has brought changes to the economy, social and political life of these countries. Since these countries have a hugely heterogeneous structure, these transformations have shown a distorted and excluding version of that experienced in developed countries (Boehlje, 1995; Fonte, 2000; Ghezán et al., 2002). Consequently, there is a coexistence of large and small firms of production and distribution of food. This means that as one economic model (which for simplicity we call traditional or craft model, with no value judgment implied) gives way to another (which again for simplicity and without value-judgment we call the modern or post-Fordist model), elements of the traditional system persist in the new system which becomes an amalgam of the traditional and the modern ones. That is, there is a coexistence of sectors dominated by Fordist logic (commodities) and sectors with flexible, demand-driven, differentiated products, adapted to the new requirements of consumers and coordination between buyers and suppliers such as contracts (Ghezán et al., 2002).

The above-mentioned considerations focus on the relationship between international food regimes and agricultural structures, the formation of 'commodity complexes' and the new way of organizing production and distribution of food. Since this article aims at analyzing how international economic processes and policies become embedded in local distribution systems, a more comprehensive approach is

needed. We intend to give significant attention to the spatial and social variability, i.e., to the multiplicity of other social actors and interests involved in the globalization process (Long, 2001).

According to Sonnino and Marsden (2006), it is necessary to identify the conceptual and methodological tools needed to grasp the variability of food networks. There are some theoretical difficulties in drawing a clear distinction between terms such as conventional and alternative when both sectors use similar discourses (local production, high quality). These changes suggest that there should be new processes of relocalization of economic activities and practices, and contested 'battles' over conventions. Besides, constructions of quality involve power relations between alternative and conventional actors. These actors of the supply chain (producers, wholesalers, modern retailers, consumers) compete for the authority to define the particular character of food quality, 'creating difficulties for small producers who wish to differentiate their product and secure added value' (Ilbery and Kneafsey, quoted by Lockie and Kitto, 2000). Sonnino and Marsden (2006) as well as Goodman and DuPuis (2002) aim at adopting a holistic approach, which involves political economy and actor-network with some of the literature associated with geography and ethnography inquiry. In addition, Lockie and Kitto (2000) claim that little attention is given to consumers and their agency in the food networks.

Following the above authors, by using the actor-oriented approach (Long, 1989; Long and Long, 1992) and its ethnographic tools, we add value to net-chain analysis (Lazzarini et al., 2001). In this way, we consider that social relations affect the economic behaviour of agents and the institutional environment of transactions at the BACWM (Granovetter, 1985). Since social changes, development and power relationships are portrayed as multidimensional and contested realities, we need to explore these social activities in their everyday practices (Certeau, 1984; Lefebvre, 1991). Listening to the actors involved in a context of change is a good way to improve political actions and to understand power as a dimension of multiple powers, where the State is part and parcel of social actions (Foucault et al., 2007). Therefore, I interviewed 180 wholesalers (census) and carried out participant observation at the BACWM for 10 months between 2007 and 2008.

The Buenos Aires Wholesale Market (BACWM) As a Social Space

The State Project

The history of the creation of the BACWM is a good illustration of the Fordist era, where the state used to have more ability to control and organize activities in the socio-economic sphere. Consequently, the BACWM did not emerge; it was constructed through the exercise of political and state power (Friedland and Robertson, 1990). Its process of creation comprehended complex and multifaceted relations of change, embodying physical, intellectual and symbolic resources of fresh fruit and vegetable distribution (Hughes, 1983). Social life of policy implementation is constituted by actions motivated by different interpretations, values and meanings of the actors involved in the process (Arce, 1993).

By 1960, public policy action to improve the distribution of fresh fruit and vegetables was needed in Argentina. Rapid population growth of the city of Buenos Aires made commercial activities of about a dozen wholesale markets difficult due to heavy traffic, lack of hygiene, important economic loss due to excess of commodities'

manipulation, an ineffective process of price negotiation, a low level of commercial transparency and poor access to information. According to the national authorities, it was necessary to regulate the speculative activities of wholesalers, since wholesalers used to retain a percentage of the producers' net income (Pons, 1988).

These political measures, however, did not deny the important role of the wholesalers as a valid response to the structural conflict between production and consumption logics. On the one hand, fruit and vegetable producing areas were (and still are) located far from large cities and thus far from urban areas. On the other hand, producers needed to provide their output to consumers or retailers. In the past, these functions were carried out to a greater or lesser extent in physical structures denominated wholesale markets (Green, 2003; Winograd, 2005).

The idea of wholesalers' parasitic and/or speculative activities was commonplace from the 1950s to the 1970s. For policy-makers, bad logistics and asymmetric information encouraged wholesalers to develop room for manoeuvre. The characteristics of seasonal supply of highly perishable products, without size or quality classification, little package normalization and long-time storage and delayed transportation were used by wholesalers for their own interests. Since they were the 'obligatory passage point' for growers and retailers, they were able to hold power in the fresh fruit and vegetable distribution. Thus, producers, who worked far from the commercialization area, had to trust their sales to wholesalers operating at the wholesale markets (Callon, 1986).

At that time, policy-makers did not discuss other important aspects to improve fruit and vegetable distribution, focusing only on the important confrontation between producers and middlemen. Policy-makers did not pay attention to actor's practices in order to develop a social knowledge based on the actor's responses to the institutional environment (cf. Arce, 1993). On the contrary, policy-makers tried to modernize the distribution system by controlling the wholesalers' activities (Interview 45, 5 May 2007).

In order to achieve efficient and modern distribution, two different ideas were developed. On the one hand, the national government's 'solution' was one market for the whole of the Metropolitan Area; and on the other hand, FAO technical consultants suggested that a decentralized system should be implemented. According to the technicians' reports (Link, 1974; Mittendorf, 1976), Buenos Aires, a densely populated city with more than 8.3 million inhabitants in 1970 (INDEC, 2002), needed more than one single market, i.e. supply should be close to areas of production and consumption without monopolizing product commercialization in only one market. Therefore, the small retailers had the possibility to access easily one of the nearest markets, without increasing transport costs.

Nevertheless, in the period of the 'Argentinean Revolution' (1966–1973), the idea of centralization or concentration prevailed because the military government believed that a single market would be more easily controlled. Thus, an agreement (National Act 17422, Buenos Aires Provincial Act 7310 and Buenos Aires City Hall Decree 22817) between national, provincial and local authorities was signed on 10 August 1967. By this agreement, the 'Buenos Aires Central Market Corporation', a public interstate organization, was created. The Corporation's objectives were to plan, construct and manage a new Market under a legal framework in the outskirts of Buenos Aires city. Subsequently, the Corporation expropriated 540 hectares, using 210 hectares for the Central Market. The rest remained for future investments.

Decree 26795/1972 established a 60 kilometer perimeter of competitive protection to the BACWM. This exclusion zone was established for a period of 20 years (extendable). The building, extension or moving of either public or private wholesale markets was banned around this area, i.e. it was compulsory concentration (Durand, 1997; Densley and Sánchez-Monjo, 1999). Nevertheless, some of the markets that were located within the protection perimeter reopened three years after the inauguration of the BACWM. Moreover, government policies liberalized trade by National Decree N° 2284/91 in October 1991. Since then, the protection perimeter of the BACWM has been limited to a 500 meter area (Fontecoba, 2003). Thus, the effective protection against competition was altered both by the manipulative power of manoeuvre of wholesalers and by the changes of government policies.

This shows the power of the wholesalers, who were capable of operating, resisting, manipulating and creating new social spaces for themselves within this institutional environment. On the other hand, the state showed its weakness to control the fresh fruit and vegetable sector in a context of huge transformation in the national and international economy during the implementation of neoliberal policies.

The ideal model of a single Wholesale Market conceived by policy-makers was not accepted by most of the wholesalers who worked in the old 23 wholesale markets (Feito, 1999, p. 226). Although some wholesalers' associations (potatoes and onions) moved to the new building in 1983, the centralization process was problematic. Wholesalers decided to go on strike for an undetermined period of time because they claimed they would lose their customers. Nevertheless, the strong will-power of politicians and producers prevailed, and the BACWM started its commercial activity on the night of 14 August 1984 (Interview 6, 4 May 2007).

Networks of different kinds of relationships (social, political and power) were constructed alongside the Market creation process. As in other markets (Bestor, 2004), different social and cultural lives and political fights were embedded at the BACWM (Granovetter, 1985). To begin with commercial activities, informal agreements between politicians and wholesalers were started.

The Creation of a Multi-reality Space

In order to better understand the differences of power within the BACWM, a more ethnographic approach is needed to know how the people involved experience the new codes of changes and how they build a new social and institutional space (see Arce, 1993). The centralization process affected wholesalers' everyday lives and they still believe they were forced to be regularized. One of them comments, 'They brought us here as if we were thieves, but the true thieves work on the 5th floor [where the political administration offices are located]' (Census 11–22, October and December 2006).

Most wholesalers have confirmed the existence of tensions between their own wishes (i.e. maximize their profit) and the state's goals (i.e. the control over economic transactions and distribution). The result is a meeting of different cultural traditions, where each actor has his/her own point of view. According to scholars and consultants, the centralization of fresh fruit and vegetable distribution seemed to be a good idea at the wrong time: 'The main arguments were infrastructure and traffic jams, but the central objective was the public control. In the 1970s, the idea of a modern

building (sanitary controls, light, sewage, easy modern access, etc.) was excellent; but it was not implemented until 1984. Too late' (Interview 64, 28 May 2007).

The opinion above shows that the government or the state was the principal organizer until the 1970s. Since the 1980s, policies and the organization of nation states were transformed due to the impact of more global interests. Consequently, central government authority and control became weaker (Bonanno, 1993; Long, 2002). Nevertheless, there are contradictory opinions. For instance, one of the witnesses of this centralization process, who still works at the Market Administration, believes that the best solution was a single wholesale market. In his opinion, politicians have always ignored the social life and the conflictive relationships between the actors of the BACWM. His comment offers different perspectives about the relationship between politicians and employees: 'The idea of the market is wonderful; the problem is people like politicians. Directors, for instance, do not know anything about markets. They are politicians and they only come here to get the revenues' (Interview 10, 10 October 2006).

The process of the BACWM's creation can be analysed as a battlefield of knowledge and power, where a multiplicity of actors is interlaced fighting over different kinds of resources. The state image as the only legitimate body for intervening in legal issues and food commercialization is questioned. Therefore, it is necessary to analyse and describe how people internalized external influences such as the implementation of state policy. After the old the markets had been moved to the new one, wholesalers operating in the new market place complained to the state for having been forced to move from their wholesale markets.

Local knowledge does not constitute a common, homogeneous body, and it enables wholesalers to manipulate and create their own room for manoeuvre. The diversity in and differential responses to state intervention, can be illustrated with the following anecdote (cf. Arce, 1993), which shows the wholesalers' different reactions to the compulsive displacement from the old markets to the new one:

The objective was to close the old 23 markets. Although the idea was conceived by the military government, it was inaugurated by the first democratic administration [after the military coup] in 1984. We were in one of the old markets [Tres de Febrero] and we did not want to be transferred. They forced us to do so. I came with my nephew, who I used to work with. The administration offered a sales room very far away from the busy part of the market. In that space we couldn't sell anything. So I told my nephew: 'I'm not coming here tomorrow. If you want, we will load our truck very early in the morning and look for a better place'. So that's what we did. We were looking for a new place when I met a young guy from the old wholesale market. He let us share the stall he had got through political contacts with a vineyard company. The only way to obtain some good place was to have political contacts. Later, we were moved to another pavilion where we rented a sales room to a metallurgical company [he smiles]. We worked under these conditions until 1992, when the Market Corporation gave us an official sales room (Interview 18, 7 December 2006).

This middleman's pilgrimage shows, on the one hand, relationships of cooperation between wholesalers and, on the other hand, conflictive social relations between individuals pursuing different objectives. In addition, this experience explains the complex and numerous ways used by the wholesalers to create their own place.

This case provides an example that enables us to follow the birth of an organized market. The national government invested in warehouses, pavilions, an auction room, a laboratory and other facilities in order to constitute a perfect market. In this process, the state played an important role in trying to construct a space of perfection or calculability, as Callon (1999) calls it in his article on the market test. It is a place where each part (buyers, sellers) is disconnected from the others in framed transactions. However, it is true that economic transactions are developed at the BACWM, and the social actors involved in these relationships have their own history as well as their own knowledge (Callon, 1999). Consequently, the BACWM is not only a physical place for circulation of products, but also a network of different localities, embodying consumers, producers and retailers. Its economic activities are firmly embedded in these wider structures of social life, in ongoing networks of personal relations rather than being carried out by atomized and economic actors (Granovetter and Swedberg, 1992; Bestor, 2004).

The process of centralization/decentralization of the fresh fruit and vegetable distribution allows us to understand the BACWM as a social space that became significant after its creation. Before people engaged each other to buy and sell at the BACWM, it was only about facilities and laws copied from other countries. Behind the new building, there was an idea of modernization and control. Although the BACWM was created to be transparent and to organize fruit and vegetable supply in Buenos Aires, the social action has also created other dynamics within the fresh fruit and vegetable sector (Scott, 1998). In other words, while policy-planners had abstract objectives, the actors involved reorganized the BACWM according to their own dynamics in order to face multiple challenges (neoliberal policy, investment of foreign capitals, new immigrations, etc.). From the way fresh food is circulated, we can see an infinity of rationalities that face and break norms. In this social space, norms are constructed not imposed. So these groups of people and commodities can not be explained by an abstract definition. We need to understand reality from within this network.

Multiple Powers at the Buenos Aires Central Wholesale Market (BACWM)

As Long (2002) points out, power and knowledge are not simply possessed, accumulated and exercised upon others. Power implies much more than the way in which hierarchies and hegemonic control demarcate social positions and opportunities, and restrict access to resources. There are many different dimensions of power, and power relationships are often unstable and reversible. Power is everywhere and it is available to anyone. It may be deployed in pursuit of any objective and its uses may be analysed in terms of the most varied instrumental and evaluative considerations (Foucault et al., 2007; Hindess, 1996). By using this multiple perspective of power, we found different interpretations, values and meanings of power at the BACWM.

Power is the outcome of complex struggles and negotiations over authority, status, reputation and resources. The relationships between wholesalers and administrators illustrates this battlefield. On the one hand, wholesalers try to increase their earnings and to receive administration services since they pay an administration fee. On the other hand, the BACWM administration depends on the middlemen's payments to support its institutional operations, such as sanitary controls, sales volumes and price survey, cleaning and maintenance. Even though both groups need each other, people

who work in the Market trading room (including the administration employees), consider that they are the only ones who really work. According to their opinion, the rest of the actors involved at the BACWM do not work, they are only politicians. One of the wholesalers interviewed said, 'The Market administrators do not defend our trade union. We employ 10000 people and, what's more, we pay wages to 5,000 lazy-bones of the Administration' (Census 5-9, carried out from October to December 2006).

These power conflicts are generally carried out by individuals associated with trade unions. In the BACWM, for example, small wholesalers are organized by *Cámara de Operadores Mayoristas Frutihortícolas (C.O.MA.FRU., Chamber of Fruit and Vegetable Wholesalers)*. The wholesalers' organization has gone through different social and political conflicts. By the 1980s, small and large wholesalers used to participate actively in any trade union, but nowadays most of them are not involved in union political activities. Different social and commercial interests fight against a consolidate association of wholesalers. This social and commercial fragmentation can be observed in the statement of the following wholesaler:

When he [referring to one of the most important middlemen] was at C.O.MA.FRU. he never wanted to be outside of political and trading meetings. When he finished his mandate at the Chamber, he didn't come again to our meetings. They [referring to the large wholesalers] receive political favours from influential people. They do businesses with the government. They export and import. That guy [referring to another large middleman who has his sales room opposite his] has a very important political and economic leverage. He works with many and different kinds of products, and also supplies supermarkets. Working with supermarkets means that you need knowledge and 'guita' [Argentinean slang word for money] in order to achieve the supermarket's conditions of quality. They have to invest too much (Interview 49C, 31 January 2007).

These differences between large and small wholesalers can be observed in the frequent and direct access to government authorities. Large and renowned wholesalers usually boast about their relationships with politicians, including the BACWM's directors. An employee of one of these large wholesalers refers to his boss's grandiloquence:

His meetings [referring to his boss] with the Ministers of Economy or Agricultural Affairs can be part of the grandiloquence he needs to transmit. At the beginning, he involved me in his future projects and I had a lot of expectations in his success. I used to think that we could become rich from one day to the next. Then I realized how he was. He is an ambivalent person. He really wants to help his fellows, but at the same time he never stops doing personal business. We can consider him as an eccentric, but he also thinks about collective projects. He gives things and ideas generously, and frequently he does not receive an equal reward (Interview 50, 13 February 2007).

The wholesalers' grandiloquence describes their way of using language in order to attract admiration and attention. The grandiloquent practices constitute a wholesaler's exercise of power inside and outside the BACWM. Grandiloquence is also shown by this other wholesaler:

We have both succeeded and failed in our contacts with the BACWM's administrators. It has been reciprocal. They [referring to the Corporation's directors] usually come to the trading room. They come to visit me and my colleagues. Some people like gossiping about directors not working. But I think that we [the Argentineans] have to improve our political education. We have undergone too many dictatorships and military coups... It is not the politicians' fault. We stopped attending the National Congress to listen to politicians such as Alicia Moreau de Justo [socialist born at the end of the nineteenth century]. Frondizi [Argentinean President, 1958–1962] was my teacher. He used to wait for me after school. We used to meet and discuss politics in a bar. Consequently, nowadays I'm a reference in the fruit sector. I have been working since I was 9 years old (Interview 19, 28 February 2007).

This wholesaler's comments show his grandiloquence and his power over politicians, wholesalers, exporters, and employees involved in fruit and vegetable distribution. This interview reveals some hierarchies and hegemonic practices of power. Nevertheless, it is important to emphasize the numerous degrees of power spread at the BACWM (see Foucault et al., 2007). Thus, power generates resistance, accommodation and strategic obedience as regular components of the politics of everyday life (Long, 2002). Room for manoeuvre and the possibilities to take political and economical benefits are associated with power. Specific actors perceive themselves as being capable of manoeuvring in certain situations; therefore they develop effective strategies to achieve their goals. Although a room for manoeuvre implies different degrees of consent, negotiation and power, social actors of the BACWM have their own idea of who the power belongs to.

On the one hand, many of the small wholesalers consider that the trading pavilions are the only important sections that generate commercial activity (Census 5–9, October–November 2006). Other wholesalers think that the opening hours of the BACWM (5 a.m. to 3 p.m., Monday to Friday) favours retailers (Interview 48 and participant observation). There are different points of view at the BACWM. 'Changarines' (casual labourers who load and unload boxes of fruits and vegetables) believe that the BACWM 'is dying' because of supermarkets (Interview 8). Although 'changarines' feel they are the 'soul' of the BACWM because they actually make the fruit and vegetable distribution possible, they consider supermarkets as their main enemies. This idea is related to the supermarkets' logistics, which eliminated the loading and unloading of fruits and vegetables. In addition, supermarkets buy directly from the local growers.

On the other hand, a Corporation's administrative officer considers that 'everybody has power at the BACWM' (Interview 37A), while another administrative employee says that 'wholesalers have gained power at the Market through the quality control area because in the last years the BACWM quality control area has given the power to wholesalers' (Interview 31B). This means that the BACWM administration has diminished the number of samples required to wholesalers to analyse chemical remainders on fruits and vegetables. According to this informant, the political decision implies giving special treatment to wholesalers, since they do not need to stop selling until they know the test results. Although quality controls are compulsory, wholesalers show their own room for manoeuvre. Another wholesaler said:

I had 200 lettuce 'cages' three days ago, and they [sanitary control] put on the strip, which means 'merchandise under sanitary control'. That meant I

had to wait until the results to be able to sell. Probably, as usual, they were going to come and allow me to sell at noon, which is too late. Who was going to come and buy lettuce at noon? So I threatened to go to the door of the Administration building and sell my lettuce right there, and they finally allowed me to sell the lettuce before I got the results from sanitary control (Census 8–30, from October to December, 2006).

These everyday practices can be linked with a conception of power as a kind of ‘molecular soap’, where unexpected elements (human and non-human) come into play and things never quite work out in the manner anticipated (Deleuze and Guattari, cited by Allen, 2003; Ball, 2002). Although the laboratory control shows the purpose of the government to preserve the welfare of the population, this control also seeks to regulate the behaviour of producers and wholesalers. Nevertheless, wholesalers are able to surpass the control. This kind of situation generates different forms of protests against the current hierarchical structure. These protests are based on sets of values that work as a counterpoint to the administration control.

It is worth noting that the social networks generated at the BACWM are not only local. The BACWM actors face and are witnesses of food globalization processes. In the case of the distribution of fresh fruits and vegetables, changes were observed particularly in the expansion of supermarkets and the new flow of immigrants. The settlement of large international retailers has led to profound changes and imposed a new logic of supply (distribution centres, economies of scale, packaging, or strict control of quality). Supermarkets, as an expression of globalization, have affected and generated a new and complex network of human and non-human elements (Ghezán et al., 2002).

Although over 90% of the wholesalers at the BACWM have no relationships with supermarkets, a few of them have managed to overcome such challenge and now work with supermarkets. There are about six wholesalers who are working with supermarkets, generating synergies within the whole group of wholesalers since they buy from them in order to complete the volume of produce required by supermarkets. In addition, these large wholesalers have invested in farming area and sell directly to supermarkets, and consequently their produce does not pass through the BACWM. Nevertheless, some of them have a favourable discourse about the role of the BACWM in their business:

I’ve always sold my products in the Market [referring to the BACWM]. All my business takes place in the Market. I was and I am convinced there must be a Wholesale Market whose prices can be transparent. Besides, the Market offers other alternatives of commercialization. Most of the suppliers who have survived the relation with supermarkets are people from the Wholesale Market (Interview 29, 26 December 2006).

In the beginning [1984], supermarkets came to buy at the BACWM. That meant that most supermarket suppliers were wholesalers when these international firms started their business in Argentina. We, wholesalers, have changed to sell to them with success. Later, supermarkets started to supply from the growers. Nevertheless, most of these alternatives failed. And why did they fail? They failed because their only objective was supermarkets. However, we had the advantage of being at the Wholesale Market, where we could sell products that supermarkets had rejected (Interview 48, 5 May 2007).

The evolution of the relationship between this particular wholesaler and supermarkets is complex and contradictory. This social relation shows a link between different lifeworlds which compete for knowledge, power and resources (see Appadurai, 1986):

We [referring to his company] were one of the first 'full-service' wholesalers during the first supermarket expansion. We put everything at supermarkets' service: vehicles, the cold storage warehouse, preparation and packaging. We looked for products according to the production zones, and thus were able to supply them the whole year through. However, supermarkets decided to buy directly from producers. Consequently, we integrated the production of tomatoes and green vegetables.

As I was trying to sort out lots of problems supermarket had, I wanted to build a strong alliance with them. I thought about getting connected to their database. I needed to know how many kilos of my products they sold per day to replace their stock. But it didn't work out. As supermarkets grew following their 'instruction manual', they demanded more and more everyday. We were fine with this. Both of us were doing good business, both of us won. If there were 10, there would be five for each; but supermarkets wanted eight (Interview 48, 5 May 2007).

In spite of this wholesaler's complains about supermarkets, he is still selling products to them. It is part of the ambiguous and contradictory relationships between middlemen and supermarkets. Although the wholesaler interviewed says the volume of his sales to supermarkets has decreased; greengrocers – who are his customers at the BACWM – say that he is still faithful to his largest clients (i.e. supermarkets). A Bolivian (wholesaler's customer) refers to this sales room:

I've bought here for eight years. They offer tomatoes the whole year. Besides, they have a wide variety of fruits and vegetables. I look for quality and price. When I need money, I buy on credit. They already know me. But the owner pays more attention to supermarkets. I remember one day that all the melons were for him. He did not want to sell them to us [referring to greengrocers]. But the following day it seemed that supermarkets rejected them, so he wanted to sell them to us (Interview 55B, 23 January 2007).

Again, this Bolivian retailer shows the possibility of wholesalers to sell products that supermarkets reject to small retailers such as 'new' immigrant retailers (i.e. Bolivians, Koreans). These 'new' actors have introduced ambiguous and contradictory relations among the actors involved at the BACWM. Some wholesalers consider new greengrocers as people who know their work, whereas others show some prejudice against immigrants (a sign of xenophobia). A wholesaler, who holds Bolivians in high esteem, says:

Working with fresh fruits and vegetables is like working with mutants. These products change from one day to another. So I believe Bolivians are good retailers. They test the merchandise. They know about fruits and vegetables, so they pay for good quality. They are not used to buying cheap. They remind me of the old retailers 25 years ago, when they came to my saleroom and said, 'What a delicious melon... keep one box for tomorrow'. And when they were in their shops, they used to advise their customers to

eat them the same day or the following day. This is not happening at the supermarkets now. Nobody knows what a melon is (Interview 29, 26 December 2006).

Nevertheless, in our ethnographic observation we could also listen to other kinds of opinions about Bolivians at the BACWM. This is a conversation between a salesman (A) and his customer (B):

A: Che [an Argentinean expression for addressing someone], she is asking me about changes at the Market since 1996. Yes, nowadays everybody is Bolivian. Do you know what's going on? They do not use soap; they eat leftovers; so they make a good profit.

B: They [referring to Bolivians] grow vegetables – they water them, they harvest them and then they sell them. They do everything. They bring cocaine from abroad. They travel every year, of course. It is OK. To tell you the truth, I really envy them.

A: Men [referring to Bolivian men] don't work; women do [referring to Bolivian women].

Even though wholesalers and other social actors had bad opinions about the new comers' greengrocers/customers, everybody interacts and makes business at the BACWM. These conflicting and contradictory relationships at the BACWM resemble the Japanese fish market described by Bestor (2004). Formal and informal regulations frame both markets. Nobody can hold the power of distribution, transaction and exchange for a long time. This institutional framework produces a variety of symbols and meanings that generate a constant reorganization of social power relations.

At the BACWM, the commercial transactions are carried out personally. They continue to be face to face. There is not an exhibition of prices at the Market under study. The buyer asks about prices and checks the product quality. Then buyer and seller reach an agreement by talking in a low voice. It seems they fix prices in a secret way so that the other customers cannot hear. The volume of the purchase, the type of product, and the availability of the product at the moment of the purchase modify the agreement conditions. Nevertheless, this personal agreement is based mainly on personal and mutual trust. This type of social relation resists the price index and the capitalist or neoclassical logic, where the transaction means only the exchange of economic values. These sales practices reveal a social dimension within commercial relationships (Appadurai, 1986).

According to Bestor (2004), these social and cultural networks, developed in the Wholesale Market, are not market imperfections. On the contrary, these networks have an important role in the social life of the merchandise, the price formation processes, quality control, and the reallocation of power in the fresh fruit and vegetable distribution. Power relocation expresses not only elements of creativity but also political conflicts and tensions between different logics of capitalism. Consequently, it is very important to analyse the BACWM from the human dimension of the social practices, since this gives life to this space of transactions.

Conclusions

This article has analysed how actors have constructed reality in the BACWM from their own knowledge and lifeworld. This social space is full of negotiations and contradictions rather than just a set of economic phenomena regulated by the logic of bookkeeping. This market is a specific geographical place and a localized set of social institutions, organizations, transactions, social actors, fruits and vegetables, trade practices, and cultural meanings. Market place refers to these interactions in a customary time and place. It is a complex social and political space, where a multiplicity of actors try to build their own labour world.

The BACWM has been changed by different political interventions (centralization/decentralization) and global processes (supermarkets, immigration), which affected people's everyday lives. Traders, employees and other actors involved at the BACWM shape the outcomes of changes. Transformations are not simply imposed on them, and different social patterns develop within the same structural circumstance. Hence, the BACWM was depicted as a multidimensional and contested reality. Its origins show different countertendencies, which cannot be analysed by a simple categorization. Countertendency implied different answers to processes such as perimeter protection, quality control, and other national and international interventions. According to different historical moments, these countertendencies show the dissemination of power in different hands. The centralization process is linked to the Fordism regime, while the decentralization process is associated with flexible specialization. Nevertheless, both processes are part of the creation and development of the BACWM as a device to distribute fresh fruits and vegetables.

By seeing the process of transformation at the BACWM from the actor's point of view, we have tried to open the black box of these multi-realities. Through the understanding of the wholesaler's countertendencies, we might be able to discuss the difficulties of policy decision-makers to take into account the everyday life of the social actors involved in the network and chain of fresh fruits and vegetables.

Even though observing the everyday practices of the actors involved in the BACWM is a good tool to understand its complexity, we cannot be so ambitious to strive for understanding the totality of this social space and its countertendencies. Taking into account that there are more everyday forms of power than institutionalized power, we used the concept of countertendency to explain how the social actors involved at the BACWM face policy interventions and globalization (Foucault et al., 2007). These countertendencies are more than opposition; they can be creative and transformative. Consequently, the BACWM can be a social space of global resistance and a global partner at the same time.

To sum up, the social and cultural relationships developed at the BACWM are not market imperfections. They carry out an important role in the social life of the commodities, the configuration of prices, quality control, and the construction of multiple powers. Consequently, the human dimension and its power relationships were taken into account in this article to understand the BACWM as a social space of commercial transactions.

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