# Fresh Fruit and Vegetables: A World of Multiple Interactions

## The Case of the Buenos Aires Central Wholesale Market (BACWM)

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## The Case of the Buenos Aires Central Wholesale Market (BACWM)

**María Laura Viteri**

**Thesis**

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To my friends here,
and in other *heterotopias*

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# 1. Approaching a Fresh Produce Marketplace

## Introduction to the Research Theme

### Marketplaces in Food Studies

Despite the fact that little attention has been paid to wholesale markets in food studies, these marketplaces continue to play a key role in fresh produce distribution. However, in the last 10 years, only a few researchers have shown interest in analysing wholesale markets as some of the main institutions that distribute fresh produce from farmers to small and large retailers as well as to foodservice entrepreneurs such as hotels, restaurants and institutions (Cadilhon et al. 2003, de Raymond 2007, Dirven and Faiguenbaum 2008, Ghezán et al. 1999, Green 2003, Shepherd 2004). However, it is worth noting that other authors have focused on food wholesale and retail markets as social spaces in which economic activities and cultural and gender aspects are embedded (Bestor 2004, Clark 1994, Kapchan 1996).

With respect to food studies, the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) has been addressing wholesale market development issues throughout the world for the past 30 years (Densley and Sánchez-Monjo 1999, Dirven and Faiguenbaum 2008, Mittendorf 1976, Shepherd 2004). FAO technicians state that adequately located, sized and managed wholesale markets are basic instruments for promoting competition and improving public health and food quality control. However, they argue that wholesale markets in less developed countries did not adapt to the dramatic distribution changes that took place during the 1990s. According to Shepherd (2004), these wholesale markets need to develop full-service centres, logistic platforms, and quality and environmental certification in order to keep their central role within fresh produce distribution.

From an evolutionary approach, Green and his colleagues (Green 2003, Green et al. 2006) have analysed different stages of European wholesale markets. They have characterised the 1970s as the decade when these marketplaces moved from the city centres to the peripheries. During the 1990s, wholesalers faced challenges that forced them to go beyond resolving conflicts between sales and demand in a particular place and time. Wholesalers started selling fresh produce to new buyers such as supermarkets[1] and fast-food restaurants, and some wholesalers even invested in different aspects of their services in order to keep supermarkets as their customers. However, these changes did not impact upon every wholesale market homogeneously. By using e-commerce distribution, traceability, quality certification, intermodal transport (truck–train, maritime–train, etc.), cold chain, and environmentally friendly waste disposal, few wholesalers and managers at marketplaces throughout the world started to provide new services such as scheduled deliveries, cut-fresh produce, and exotic fresh fruit and vegetables. According to Green and colleagues (Green et al. 2006, Lechardoy 2006, Maymó 2003), wholesale markets – like Rungis near Paris and Mercabarna near Barcelona – faced these challenges successfully, and are thus known as third-generation marketplaces.

Third-generation wholesale markets show capacity to react quickly to changes. Based on active regulations implemented by policy-makers to favour small independent wholesale and retail businesses, nation states strive to constitute public and private alliances to assure fresh produce to the population (Green 2003, Winograd 2005). Although these third-generation wholesale markets can cover their operating costs by means of wholesalers' revenues, an extra budget is required to provide facilities to overcome challenges such as management waste disposal in an environmentally friendly way (Illescas et al. 2008, Maymó 2003, Saphir 2002). Thus, good relationships between authorities and users of wholesale markets explain part of their success to face crises.

[1] In this thesis, the term supermarket is used to refer to all kinds of large-format retail stores, such as supermarkets, hypermarkets and discount stores.

Since one cannot reduce the multiple strategies developed by wholesalers around the world to a single marketing aspect, Cadilhon et al. (2003) suggest to look at the role of wholesale markets within their own contexts. By analysing four European wholesale markets (Rotterdam, London, Verona and Paris), the authors point out that these marketplaces developed different strategies that vary greatly according to the country in which they are located. Europe can be divided into countries where wholesale markets have lost a considerable part of their customers and those where wholesaling of fresh food is still an important activity. Wholesale markets related to a strong fast-food and supermarket culture (northern Europe) have more difficulties to innovate and consolidate as places with a variability of supplies and services than southern European wholesale markets.

However, other authors consider that the fresh produce wholesale markets have lost their important role in distribution because of supermarkets. By focusing particularly on developing countries, a large group of academics (Cook 2004b, Dolan and Humphrey 2000, Gibbon 2003, Gutman 1997, Reardon and Berdegué 2002, Reardon et al. 2005) have attributed that part of the diminished sales within wholesale markets are related to supermarkets and their changes in fresh produce procurement. In the United States, for example, Cook (2004b) points out that fresh produce wholesale markets have remained an expression of price fluctuations because of speculative actions based on the variability of weather conditions, communication problems, and a lack of store capacity demanded by the circulation and distribution of perishable products. Since demand and supply are unpredictable in these marketplaces, more buyers are moving to seasonal or annual contracts. These annual contracts are developed mainly between large buyers (like supermarkets, fast-food companies) and growers. They plan the supply of fresh produce according to particular qualities and price throughout the season of production or the whole year in order to avoid price speculation. This modality of contracts, in the long term, may affect the viability and the existence of wholesale markets in the United States as the main actors for the distribution of fresh fruit and vegetables.

The shift of supermarkets from relying on spot markets (in particular, 'traditional' wholesale markets and brokers) towards a growing use of specialised wholesalers forced wholesale markets to focus on other customers, such as hotels, restaurants and public institutes. However, the type of supplier chosen can differ between products, for a given supermarket chain in a given country, or between countries for a given product (Berdegué et al. 2005, Hernández et al. 2007). For instance, in Brazil, Argentina and Mexico, most of the supermarket chains continue to procure at least part of their needs from wholesale markets (Farina 2002, Ghezán et al. 2002, Schwentesius and Gómez 2002).

The study of Dirven and Faiguenbaum (2008) focuses on the importance of fresh fruit and vegetable wholesale markets in Chile. By providing a wider range of quality and variety of products, these marketplaces allow small retailers to offer fresh produce at a low price. Thus, wholesale markets offer

advantages to consumers who cannot afford purchases in supermarkets and to small growers who do not have the size to supply directly to supermarkets. However, it seems that the landscape of wholesale markets involves much more than only offering cheap and low-quality produce (de Raymond 2007, Humphrey 2007). Reardon et al. (2005) have shown the capacity of a few wholesalers to transform their businesses according to supermarkets' requirements. Nevertheless, few studies have focused on the everyday life of wholesale markets in order to show the multiple strategies developed by the social actors in these marketplaces. By studying the Rungis market, de Raymond (2007) states that wholesalers have the capacity to create a place much richer in elements than the stable and homogeneous circulation of fresh fruit and vegetables established by supermarkets. This can explain the wholesale markets' resilience in the era of supermarkets. As Cadilhon et al. (2003) point out, any country or any product has its own evolution. This means that it is difficult to generalise the evolution of wholesale markets without deep observations of how new transformations have taken place through social actors' practices in their own social and commercial spaces.

## Food Studies Approaches

In the context of food studies, it is assumed that industrial, processed and packaged foods have replaced local food cultures and diets. However, this is not a linear process of *appropriationism* and *substitutionism*[2] where it seems that technological changes are the only responsible factors for the modification of agriculture. Thus, many studies have shown that the social actors engaged in the production, distribution and consumption of food respond to these tendencies in a variety of ways (Arce 2009b, Arce and Marsden 1993, Marsden and Murdoch 2006, Marsden and Arce 1995). Global regimes (Bonanno 1990, Bonanno and Constance 1996, Friedmann 2005, McMichael 1994), alternative food networks in Europe (Marsden et al. 1999, Renting et al. 2003, van der Ploeg et al. 2000) and the circulation (Arce 1993b, Dolan and Humphrey 2000) and consumption (Arce and Fisher 1999) of global commodities in different countries are used as part of a framework to understand changes in food.

In order to analyse the heterogeneities and diversities of rural and food spaces, many scholars(Bonanno and Constance 2008, Goodman and DuPuis 2002, Lockie and Kitto 2000, Long 2008, Murdoch 1998, Murdoch and Pratt 1993, Whatmore and Thorne 1997) have argued for a more dynamic social analysis by taking into account the expression of the global into local processes. Arce and Marsden (1993, 1995) insist on paying attention to how local everyday social practices generate multiple ways of food production,

[2] These terms were coined by Goodman et al. (1987) to explain that the biological and physiological properties of food have shaped the process of industrialisation and that industrialisation has attempted to domesticate nature. *Appropriationism* replaces the natural process by an industrial one (e.g. machinery, fertilizers) and *substitutionism* replaces the natural product by an industrial ones (e.g. synthetic fibre for cotton) (Goodman et al. 1987).

circulation and consumption. This needs to be analysed by mapping out the cognitive and social dimensions of practices. To me, this means following social actors' practices and food performances. By doing so, it is possible to explain producers', retailers', and consumers' differential responses to market demands and policy interventions. This implies a theoretical position that 'reduces differences between dominant and counter-dominant forms dealing with food' (Arce 2009b: 4). In short, by describing social actors' multiplicities of understandings, beliefs and practices, it is possible to show heterogeneous rather than homogeneous food worlds (Arce 1997, Fisher 1997).

The necessity for new approaches to understand the complex world of food has lead researchers to choose the so-called 'alternative' perspectives to political economy approach. Studies of the food network have attempted to avoid orthodox accounts of globalisation as an abstract 'system'[3], 'where supply and demand rationally rule over individual and group decision-making processes' (Arce 2009b: 7). Although the notion of network is developed by political economics (Barnes 1968, Burt 1992, White 1981), the network approach in agro-food studies is concerned particularly with Granovetter's sociological analysis (Granovetter 1973, Granovetter 1985) and actor network theory (Latour 1987). However, both political economics and scholars' alternative to political economists use the notion of *embededdness*[4] (Wilkinson 1997, 2006).

These 'alternative' approaches in agro-food and regional studies have generated an interesting debate between scholars who support approaches such as the transaction cost theory and those who look for more dynamic perspectives (Williamson 1994). However, this debate seems to be overcome by researchers who have combined the alternative perspectives with the global value chains orientation (Dicken et al. 2001, Harvey et al. 2002, Lazzarini et al. 2001, Ponte and Gibbon 2005). Although some of these scholars are convinced that the relational nature of networks and the central intentionality of human agency must be the focus of food studies, they are

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[3] By abstract system Arce refers to different authors who use a political economy approach to study food: commodity chains (Davis and Goldberg 1957, Friedland 1984), Latin American ramification of the French *filière* school (Vigorito 1978), state-centred analyses (Friedman 1993, McMichael 1994), system of provision (Fine 1994), and global value chain (Gereffi 1994, Gereffi et al. 2005). For latest overviews, see Dicken et al. 2001, Lockie and Kitto 2000, Raikes et al. 2000, Wilkinson 1997, 2006.

[4] The term embeddedness is attributed to Polanyi (1957). In spite of Polanyi's argument that all economies are embedded and enmeshed in social relations and institutions, he considers that the abstract market economy imposed by the neoclassical school is presented as a dis-embedded economy. Polanyi's position reveals that economic models do not take into account that social processes shape economic life (Dilley 1992b, Gemici 2008, Krippner et al. 2004, Smelser and Swedberg 1994a). Granovettter modifies the notion of embeddedness by considering that a fruitful analysis of human action requires us to avoid the atomisation implicit in the theoretical extremes of under- and over-socialised conceptions. According to him, actors do not decide as atoms outside a social context. The market does not exist once and for all, a market is a social construction (Granovetter 1985, 1990a).

searching for an approach that combines this agency perspective with a structural understanding of power relations in the global economy.

One example of the last position is represented by Lazzarini et al. (2001). They use the term net-chain in order to integrate elements of both network and chain perspectives. They recognise and account that simultaneous interdependencies of diverse kinds of relations must be taken into account for a more advanced understanding of complex inter- organisational relations. They, thus, consider that supply-chain analysis is becoming an interdisciplinary activity that involves a mixture of socioeconomic, technological, legal and environmental criteria that are highly complementary in explaining overall agro-food net-chain performance.

Other scholars have attempted to innovate studies of food and agriculture by applying convention theory (Allaire and Boyer 1995, Boltanski and Thévenot 1999) with its worlds of production (Storper 1997), actor-network (Callon 1986, 1998, Latour 1987) and actor-oriented approaches (Long 1992, 2007). According to Wilkinson (1997, 2006), a pioneering and original application of actor-network and convention theories to commodity chains was developed by Lawrence Busch. By focusing on particular commodities, Busch and his colleagues (Busch and Tanaka 1996, Juska and Busch 1994, Sousa and Busch 1998) argue that a network perspective allows them to discuss technological change beyond dichotomies such as exogenous and endogenous factors of development.

Studies at Cardiff University (Marsden 2000, Marsden et al. 2000, Marsden and Murdoch 2006, Morgan et al. 2006, Murdoch 1995, Murdoch and Miele 1999) have also combined the above approaches to explain how economic processes are embedded in nature, while distinguishing different types of food embeddings in a variety of 'worlds of production'. Following Storper (1997), Murdoch et al. (2000: 122) tend to differentiate between 'worlds of production' in terms of standardised-generic products and specialised-dedicated products[5]. They use the term 'alternative', but also recognise that it is not appropriate to overcome dualisms such as alternative/conventional forms of organising food production, distribution and consumption. Through case studies, they observe that transnational companies like supermarket chains also buy and sell 'fair trade', 'organic' and 'conventional' food to maximise their benefits (Sonnino and Marsden 2006). Thus, they argue for an analysis that goes beyond dichotomies, since different supply-chain cases do not necessarily fit neatly into simple typological frameworks (Marsden et al. 2000).

Many food scholars sympathise with the actor-network perspective as a useful method to analyse crises such as bovine spongiform encephalopathy (BSE) or other diseases caused by infectious agents that 'have the ability' to organise and re-organise food chains. This means that the transformations in the food

[5] The first group of products might be detached from nature (dis-embedding), while specialised-dedicated products might be linked to nature and local production (re-embedding).

sector are linked to an assemblage of human and non-human elements called *actants* by actor-network scholars (Latour 2005). However, many commentators do not accept the principle of giving the same capacity to act to humans and non-humans. Murdoch (1998) considers that in particular circumstances humans will be enrolled into a network as reflexive actors and that this behaviour[6] is impossible to find in other '*actants*'. In other words, some non-humans have the capacity to act but are not knowledgeable about their action (Giddens 1981). This position provoked discussions between scholars around the possibilities to improve a framework for agro-food studies (Goodman 1999, 2004, Marsden 2000, van der Ploeg and Renting 2004) by considering or not the principle of symmetry in food studies[7].

Other academic debates are related to studies about consumers' practices and alternative ways of production. The centrality given to production rather than to consumption (Brunori 2007, Marsden et al. 2000, Renting et al. 2003, van der Ploeg et al. 2000) is criticised by several authors (Goodman 2003, 2004, Goodman and DuPuis 2002, Lockie 2002, Lockie and Collie 1999, Lockie and Kitto 2000) who consider that this kind of studies reifies the local and neglects that the local is a configuration of power relations. Lockie and Collie (1999) argue that consumption is seen as something produced from the outside. In order to surpass dichotomies such as the 'dictatorship of the consumers' or 'the production of consumption', Goodman and DuPuis (2002) suggest focusing on the post-exchange life of commodities. Drawing on Appadurai (1986)[8], Phillips (2006) calls to track the route of edible commodities, placing them in a cultural and historical context. Ian Cook's analyses (1994, 2004a) constitute an example of these kinds of works.

Another approach used to analyse food changes is the actor-oriented perspective. Arce and his colleagues (Arce 1993b, 1997, 2009a, Arce and Fisher 1999, Blanco 2007, Fisher 1997, Laguna 2010, Willems 2006) focus on detailed studies that show 'how global processes are mediated, adapted or managed by the life-experience of people' (Arce 1997: 77). Their starting point is the existence of multiple realities (i.e. the coexistence of different understandings and interpretations of experience), which can be analysed only by an ethnographic understanding of everyday life. Thus, by using

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[6] Behaviour, in this thesis, is used as a synonym of social practices.

[7] Other authors address the issue of symmetry in different contexts: Arce and Long (2000a: 29-30), Golinski (1998: 41-42), and Collins and Yearly and Callon and Latour in Pickering (Arce and Long 2000b, Golinski 1998, Pickering 1992).

[8] In *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective*, Appadurai et al. (1984) argue that things (commodities), like people, have social lives. Commodities are socialised through exchange and the judgement made about them by subjects. In neoclassical economics, the word 'commodity' is used only to refer to a special subclass of primary goods and no longer plays a central analytic role, but for Appadurai et al. commodities are also cultural and cognitive objects. Thus, they propose to analyse how a commodity was acquired, how and from whom the money was assembled to pay for it, the relationship of the seller to the buyer, the uses/consumption of the commodity, the identity of its user or consumer and, finally, when the commodity collapses or is consumed. All of these details would reveal a biography/career entirely different from a different social context.

ethnographies and reflexive social analysis, they give importance to networks and local actor agencies within the globalisation of specific commodities, such as salmon, honey, quinoa and pineapple (Blanco 2009, Fisher 1997, Laguna 2010, Willems 2006). By drawing particularly on this approach, and using some elements of actor-network theory, this thesis attempts to understand the social life of fresh fruit and vegetable distribution through social interactions. In order to explore these different interfaces, the study will approach ethnographically the Buenos Aires central wholesale market (BACWM).

## The Conceptual Framework: The Buenos Aires Central Wholesale Market (BACWM) Study

### Introduction

After the previous brief review of different ways to approach markets and food studies that highlighted particularly chains and networks, the reader may wonder why the present study is centred only in a particular social place of the multiple ones that are involved in the production, distribution and consumption of fresh fruit and vegetables. The BACWM is a special place where diverse actors involved in fresh fruit and vegetable distribution converge. At the BACWM, linkages between horizontal networks and vertical chains can be analysed through different co-operative and competitive interactions between actors. Thus, this marketplace is an interesting window through which to approach the complex changes occurring within the fresh produce 'net-chain' in Argentina over the last years (Lazzarini et al. 2001, Ruben et al. 2006).

I took the challenge to map out the cognitive and social dimensions of the practices (interactions) developed by the users of the BACWM to avoid abstract and generalised explanations (see Arce 2009b). It means going beyond statements like 'wholesale markets in less developing countries are not *modern*' (Shepherd 2004). Hence, this research will attempt to move away from state descriptions to examine how fresh fruit and vegetable distribution is built, shaped and reproduced over time and space through social practices (cf. Marsden et al. 2000).

Although this research takes into account numerous actor network (Latour 2005, Latour and Woolgar 1979) criteria to go beyond dichotomies and preconceptions, I decided to focus on social interactions and social actors who give agency to – in this case – fresh fruit and vegetables, buildings and other material devices at the BACWM. As explained above, in spite of the capacity to act, the latter do not have the capacity to describe their actions. Thus, social actors and their practices are the main focus for this thesis even though they are continuously interacting with other *actants* and are influenced by them. This can be illustrated by a wholesaler's comment referring to fresh produce as mutants since they change appearance (colour and smell) as the days go by (Chapter 2). However, as Golinski (1998) points out, it is a matter of my decision as a writer to call attention into these minute flash points of

everyday experiences, rather than to represent with this statement a clear division between human and non-human agency.

This thesis does not focus directly on the consumption of fresh produce. Nonetheless, some BACWM's users are always in contact with consumers and their practices show how consumption has changed through the years. So, it is possible to illustrate the evolution of fresh produce consumption through social actors' practices. For instance, a wholesaler complains that nowadays people prefer yogurt to fresh produce (Chapter 2), or greengrocers remember that they used to sell a large amount of products in the 1970s while nowadays they are not able to have this kind of demand in their shops (case study 2 of Chapter 7). This means that focusing on social practices allows gathering information beyond a particular marketplace like the BACWM. By following the actors, this thesis analyses the fresh produce distribution without a flat and holistic point of view. The empirical material collected throughout 10 months of fieldwork has implied a work of reflection to understand the complex assemblage of people and market devices (material and non-material goods) intertwined at the BACWM. In this sense, the work of ethnography carried out at the BACWM can be a contribution to food studies since it does not dispute the growing influence of large retailers along the fresh produce net-chain (cf. Gereffi 1994, Lazzarini et al. 2001), but it suggests that this influence is not sufficient in itself to justify ignoring other ways of distributing and organising the social world generated around fresh fruit and vegetables (cf. Lockie and Kitto 2000, Marsden and Arce 1995).

An illustration of the variable ways of fresh food circulation is the study of different perceptions of quality. In order to understand the social significance of quality (Arce 2009b), this thesis explores ethnographically the everyday interactions between buyers and sellers at the BACWM. Like scholars associated with the economy of qualities (Callon et al. 2002) and convention theories (Ponte and Gibbon 2005), I strive to go beyond political economy approaches that have only focused on elements of power and co-ordination. By taking into account different networks (official quality norms and its countertendencies, supermarket quality standards, negotiable standards and so on), this research analyses the multiple worlds of quality by a set of commoditised and non-commoditised relations[9]. These interactions involve a variety of actors and groups that can open up or restrict the circulation of food products. Thus, it is important to understand quality as part of a historical trajectory (Appadurai 1986). Quality is linked to particular livelihoods, incomes and local entrepreneurial forms of organisation. Hence, by focusing on how quality is constructed at the BACWM, it is possible to make visible different ways of organising the distribution of fresh produce.

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[9] As shown before, commoditised relations are related to products 'saleable for money' or 'exchangeable for a wide array of other things'. The process of commoditization adds exchange value to objects that normally possess solely 'use value'. On the contrary, the non-commoditised relations go beyond economic value and utility (Appadurai 1986, Kopytoff 1986). For instance, a tomato cultivated at home involves non-commoditised relations since it will be consume by the family.

Doing ethnography at the BACWM allowed going beyond dualisms such as modern and homogeneous quality standards and traditional and non-formal agreements of quality. Although the food net-chains approach (Lazzarini et al. 2001, Ruben et al. 2006) is a good starting point to analyse part of the complex relationships between actors, deep participant observation at key places such as the BACWM leads us to go beyond hierarchical relations like sellers and suppliers and partially to open the 'black boxes' of different linkages between horizontal networks of people and vertical supply chains. This means analysing interactions between not only buyers and sellers (Callon 1999), but also between policy-makers and wholesalers, administrators and civil servants, wholesalers and their employees, and so on. Observing social interactions permit us to understand how important these actors are in the construction of the fresh produce industry. Consequently, the ethnography work – even though is time-consuming – is a valuable methodological device to understand complexity and to give a more complete picture about the distribution of fresh produce to future political intervention strategies.

Although both actor-network theory (ANT) and convention theory (CT) help us to address heterogeneity by emphasising multiple motivations and evaluations of social relations, it seems that few food studies carry out detailed observations of everyday social practices beyond key actors' practices. Thus, the present thesis uses the actor-oriented approach[10] (Long 2001a) as a springboard to focus on social practices. The BACWM is seen as a 'stage in which the set, the actors, the actions, the theatre and even the audience are constantly under (re)construction' (Busch 2007, drawing on Goffman 1975). The stage is a useful metaphor to analyse the different performances of each actor involved in fresh produce distribution and to understand the complexity. So, this thesis moves from the flow description of products to how different ways of fresh produce circulation are built through multiple social interactions.

## Setting the Significance of the BACWM

The choice of the BACWM as the object of study is based on its central role in the fresh fruit and vegetable distribution in Argentina. This marketplace supplies more than 11 million consumers, receives about 13,000 trucks a week from different production areas both within and outside the country, and moves more than 1,000,000 tons of fresh produce a year. The BACWM is strategically located only 12 km from down-town Buenos Aires, and near Ezeiza International Airport and Río de La Plata Port. The BACWM covers an

[10] This perspective known as the actor-oriented approach emerged as a counter-analysis of structural perspectives that focus only on major social groupings, without taking into account the variability and flexibility of particular social systems (Long 1968). This approach came to be associated with Norman Long and his colleagues at the Rural Development Sociology Group at Wageningen University (Arce 1993a, de Vries 2001, Long 1977, Long and Long 1992, Nuijten 1998, van der Ploeg 1990, Verschoor 1997), although some of these authors have attempted to link this approach to food studies (Arce and Marsden 1993, Marsden and Arce 1995a). For the latest overview, see Blanco (2009: Chapter 2).

area of 540 hectares, 210 of which are used for fresh fish, fruit and vegetable commercialisation and administration activities. The rest is reserved for future development, such as storage facilities (Chapter 2).

The BACWM is the result of a political intervention aimed at ordering and making more 'efficient' the distribution of fresh fruit and vegetables in the metropolitan area of Buenos Aires. This area can be considered the cultural and political capital of Argentina, since it plays an important role in the national economy, absorbing 53% of the people employed and 56% of the value of production. The socioeconomic significance of the metropolitan area means that any improvement or deterioration to the Buenos Aires food supply system could influence the distribution of fresh fruit and vegetables in the rest of the national system (cf. Frigerio 1973).

Since the BACWM's inauguration (1984), multiple changes in its legal framework, technology and other innovations have been developed for fresh produce distribution. These changes can be analysed as the outcomes of different negotiations and conflicts between the actors involved. In this thesis, the intervention of the state and other factors (transnational companies, immigrants) is taken as a process of negotiation rather than an imposition from outsiders (cf. Long 1996). In short, the complex assemblage of laws, newcomers or new technologies developed at the BACWM is not the outcome only of external institutions, such as transnational companies, or the national government. The whole network of relationships/interactions involved around the BACWM and fresh fruit and vegetable activities has been shaped and is still shaped by wholesalers, porters, buyers, suppliers, civil servants, policy-makers, pedlars, transnational companies, the national government, international norms and the like. Understanding the BACWM thus requires one to study and analyse particular social practices in this complex context without assuming any conception such as who has the power or who is right or wrong at fresh produce distribution.

Although the BACWM has experienced serious competition over the last 20 years, it has managed to remain as an important place for fresh produce distribution. The BACWM is not only an important supplier to new (immigrants, supermarkets) and old (greengrocers) retailers (Chapters 2, 6 and 7), or a hub where growers can send their products to be sold, it is also a centre of political conflicts related to interventions and demonstrations (Chapters 3 and 5). The circulation of different kinds of information and knowledge are part of the everyday practices at the BACWM.

The different changes and challenge that BACWM's users faced throughout the 1990s implied more fragmentation, which has increased the heterogeneity and complexity of fresh produce distribution. New relations have thus been developed among different users of the BACWM. These interactions from newcomers, such as supermarket procurement officers or Bolivian growers and retailers, to changes in the legal framework, which allow other wholesale markets to be opened and expanded beyond the official perimeter of competitive protection of the BACWM (see Chapter 2). This explains, in part, the economic, political and social relevance of this marketplace. The BACWM

provides the context of fresh fruit and vegetable distribution. A mixture of a variety of producing, retailing and consuming forms is present at this marketplace.

Thus, the social conflicts developed at the BACWM will receive particular interest in this research. Conflicts allow an understanding of how actors are involved in power and knowledge struggles in order to pursue their own interests (Gluckman 1958). These conflicts will be illustrated by different interfaces between, for example, wholesalers and policy-makers (Chapters 2 and 5), civil servants and wholesalers, vendors and porters (Chapter 3) and buyers and sellers (Chapters 6 and 7). These different interfaces are examples of discontinuities in the social life of the BACWM. Such discontinuities imply 'discrepancies in values, interests, knowledge and power that typically occur at points where different and often conflicting social domains intersect' (Long 1996). Domains represent for people some shared values that absolve actors from the need to explain themselves to each other. Although they have a common language that allows them to communicate with each others, in their everyday practices it seems that they understand their reality and their particular actions differently. This means that they do not always share the same representations, intentions and interests in spite of using a common language (see Chapter 3).

In other words, this thesis aims to be a contribution to food studies by exploring everyday practices of BACWM's users. The latter are the social actors that work (wholesalers, civil servants, chairmen, porters, odd-jobbers, pedlars, etc.), bring (growers, middlemen) and buy fresh produce (other wholesalers, greengrocers', supermarket procurement officers, restaurants' owners) everyday at the BACWM, as well as other people who go to pick up fresh produce from the rubbish at closing hours. The everyday practices of BACWM's users show that wholesale markets are more than economic and social spaces. Wholesale markets are an assemblage of people, regulations, buildings, fresh fruit and vegetables, passion, knowledge, information, and so on. This assemblage of people, material and non-material goods construct the BACWM as a place where chaos and order, tradition and modernity, global and local situations are blended or happen at the same time. Thus, this complexity needs to be analysed by using an approach that allows linking social practices with the distribution of fresh fruit and vegetables beyond abstract concepts such as supply and demand. Hence, in order to select an appropriate perspective, I will surf through different alternatives offered by food scholars.

The BACWM is a place of economic exchanges of fresh fruit and vegetables. In addition, as with any social site; it is a place of interactions where complex, diverse and multiple ways of organising fresh fruit and vegetable distribution are developed. These relationships provide physical and material forms to this space. This means that the materiality of social actions (body gestures and speeches) and their physical contexts produce this marketplace. Thus, the

BACWM is the outcome of a heterogeneous assemblage of people, fresh produce, and market devices[11] interacting between them.

Since the present study will give priority to the actors who construct and reconstruct the BACWM by facing different changes through the years, the focus will be on the interactions between people and the effect of these interactions on fresh produce distribution. Social interactions involve material and non-material goods such as knowledge, information, honour, feeling, passion and prestige. By avoiding generalisations and taking into account the relationships between the different social actors' at the BACWM, this thesis aims to answer the following research question:

How do the 'makers'[12] of the BACWM face changes in a context of fresh fruit and vegetable distribution?

## The Main Conceptual Orientation of the Thesis

The BACWM is an assemblage made up of people and goods exchanged (De Landa 1997, Knorr-Cetina 1981) which must be analysed by using a theoretical framework that takes into account the social as an enacted factor (Law and Urry 2004). This implies going beyond orthodox economics, which focus on each decision-maker in isolation from the others, and Marxian orthodox sociology, which takes society and the market as wholes without taking into account the historical processes generated through social interactions (De Landa 1997, Etzioni 1988). Thus, I decided to follow actors and observe what they do at the BACWM. By so doing, I described and analysed multiple interactions that involve more than the interface generated by fresh fruit and vegetable distribution. In order to frame the practices observed, a few working definitions were developed through my readings. These working definitions are related to social interactions (transaction, exchange), power and knowledge interfaces, social space and marketplace.

## Social Interactions:

The social interactions focus is a tradition that has some pedigree in social science, and probably its origins can be tracked back to the end of the 1950s. Hence, the notion of social interactions used in this thesis involves social **transactions** as well as social **exchanges**. While transactions are related to

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[11] Device is Callon et al's translation of Foucault's *dispositif*. Their main proposition is that markets are constructed and performed through and by way of heterogeneous assemblages (merchandising tools, trading and quality protocols, phones, screens, warehouses, etc.), which they call market devices (Callon et al. 2007, Callon and Muniesa 2005).

[12] The term 'makers', here, has a phenomenological, social constructivist connotation. It means that the BACWM is socially constructed through the everyday practices and interpretations and knowledge of its users (Abolafia 1998, Granovetter 1990a).

economic models of decision-making,[13] exchanges are associated with symbolic communication.[14] Drawing on Heath (1976: 28), I propose to develop an understanding of social interaction based on social actors' practices. It seems that the motives governing the social interactions at the BACWM go beyond economic factors. Through interactions, social actors build up networks (Ekeh 1974) between policy-makers, growers, buyers, employees and fresh produce. In order to understand how they construct networks, and, in some ways, how they construct the BACWM, it is necessary to identify how social actors react to particular social situations (Homans 1958). Thus, the idea of being at the BACWM's stage to observe how social encounters influence each other (Goffman 1963) in a context that goes beyond the physical space of this marketplace is the backbone of this thesis.

In some way, I aimed at recovering Homans's (1958) and Blau's (1964) intellectual efforts at understanding social life through social interactions. Although their starting point is too individualist without taking into account the social context of interactions (Ekeh 1974, Kapferer 1976), they contribute to understanding social life by opening up economic exchange to non-material goods. This allows us to analyse exchanges at the BACWM by taking into account not only the material goods (money, fresh fruit and vegetables, boxes, and other devices) but also non-material ones like symbols of approval or prestige, feelings, knowledge or information.

Social actors act according to a complex of motivations that go beyond economic interests. Thus, this thesis will focus not only on the economic interactions between buyers and sellers, but also on the interactions between managers and wholesalers, civil servants and wholesalers' employees and the like. Drawing on the economy, I consider these social actors as rational decision-makers in a context of uncertainties (Etzioni 1988, Heath 1976, Kapferer 1976). This context of uncertainties leads the social actors to establish different interactions and networks in order to cope with incomplete information (Abolafia 1998, Granovetter 1985, Gudeman 2008).

In the particular case of the BACWM, multiple interactions are developed in order to surpass uncertainties. Some examples of the multiple strategies used by BACWM's users to deal with uncertainties are developed in different chapters of this thesis. Chapter 2 proves that the BACWM is the result of different negotiations and cognitive struggles that take place between policy-makers, civil servants, growers, porters and wholesalers. This shows that the BACWM was not established in a 'social vacuum' (Garcia-Parpet 2007). Wholesalers started working at the BACWM with their own work experience and knowledge from other wholesale markets. They thus faced uncertainties

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[13] Transaction analysis became popular in sociology by Blau's *Exchange and Power in Social Life* (Blau 1964) and in anthropology by Barth's *Models of Social Organization* (1966 quoted by Heath 1976: 25).

[14] Exchange theory has two broad referents in anthropology: Malinowski's (1922) obligation of reciprocity and Mauss's (1970 [1925]) notion of the gift. The concept of social exchange may refer microscopically to a process by which individuals' actions, beyond normative constraints, are governed by their personal perceptions (Parkin 1976).

of the new marketplace by constructing and reconstructing old and new networks. Chapter 5 shows how an auditor, who comes to the marketplace to control prices, needs to establish informal and formal relations with wholesalers in order to achieve his goals of reducing 'official' prices. Chapter 7 illustrates how buyers, through their long-term relations with sellers, manage to acquire particular products in a shortage period, and how they win the peon's 'favours' at the stall by offering them tips as a gift.

The social interactions at the BACWM are the outcomes of rational and non-rational actions. The latter are related to passions for money, accumulation, good business and love for work (cf. Hirschman 1977). Thus, in the present research, interests and passions are treated as synonymous. Both move social actors to act. This conception implies going beyond rational and utilitarian behaviour to give a place to creativity (Etzioni 1988). Creativity is not an attribute only of poets, artists or inventors. Creativity is performed within situations that call for solutions (Joas 1996). In this sense, the BACWM is full of creative actions linked to diverse strategies used by wholesalers and other workers to face challenges. Among various examples, it is possible to mention how porters manage to work at the BACWM as well as at other wholesale marketplaces (Chapter 3), how wholesalers enter into negotiation with different and heterogeneous growers or buyers (Chapters 4, 6 and 7), or how some civil servants offer their 'expertise' to private actors such as supermarkets.

## Interface: Outcome of Social Interactions

The social interactions at the BACWM involve both face-to-face and 'distanced' relationships. These interpersonal networks cross-cut different points of references that are known as social domains, such as rural, urban, local and global (Long 1989, Long 1992, Long 2000). These encounters are full of social, cultural and economic discrepancies. They may involve the interplay of different 'worlds of knowledge', such as those of wholesalers, civil servants and buyers. These kinds of interactions can be analysed by using the notion of interface. Although the concept of interface has been used to analyse phenomena of political 'intervention' in rural areas (Arce 1993a, Arce and Long 1992, Long 1989, 2001a, Long and Villarreal 1993, van der Ploeg 1989), it is useful to describe other encounters between different 'worlds of knowledge' at the BACWM. Consequently, the dynamic and complex relations developed at the BACWM can be also analysed through **interfaces between knowledge and power**.

Knowledge is always exchanged at the BACWM. Social actors with different knowledge and information attempt to enrol others in their 'projects' (Arce 1989, Long 1989, Long 1992). In this thesis, this is illustrated by state intervention situations (the BACWM's creation, price controlling) or newcomer buyers (supermarkets, immigrants), where different worlds of knowledge and power are encountered. Thus, knowledge and power constitute the relational effects of social interactions (Arce and Long 1994, Giddens 1977, Mann 1986)

that can be exercised simultaneously by several people (Ekeh 1974, Foucault 1980, Foucault et al. 2007). So, power is a consequence rather than a cause of action. Power is seen as a relational effect of interactions between actors (Latour 1986, Lockie and Kitto 2000).

The interfaces between wholesalers and civil servants, wholesalers and buyers, wholesalers and their suppliers cannot be studied as a linear and static process, since they are the results of different struggles for power and knowledge. For instance, the intervention of the BACWM by an auditor to control prices (see Chapter 5) is not a wholesale demonstration of superiority. His intervention has induced a reorganisation of partially overlapping areas of fresh fruit and vegetable distribution (cf. Parkin 1995). Thus, in order to understand any kind of intervention, such as that of the state, it would be useful to shift the focus from 'governmentality' (Foucault 1991) to 'governability' in order to capture the dynamics and ambiguities entailed in every process of intervention. This requires us to move from the mentality of power in the hands of a few to the ability of state actors or others, such as supermarket procurement officers, to negotiate their goals with other people (cf. Arce and Long 2007). In short, 'governmentality' is associated with a practice of elite and experts. The latter use authority and legislation to establish what social order should be, whereas governability is a negotiation between parts where counterworks to the legislation are present.

Social interactions at the interface contain the potential to generate something other or unexpected within the social context where these interactions take place (Handelman 2006). Thus, these unintended/unplanned consequences are emergent properties of social actions and interactions (Calhoun et al. 1990, Handelman 2006, Knorr-Cetina 1981a). According to Giddens, it is possible to understand the transformation of social institutions by means of emergent properties. Thus, the encounter between the administrators and wholesalers at the BACWM generates contested realities, which promote different and entangled life-worlds (cf. Arce and Long 2000a). These unintended consequences are more than the sum of individual parts. The thesis illustrates this through the creation of the BACWM, the proliferation of new and old wholesale markets, and the diverse and multiple ways of organising fresh fruit and vegetable distribution (Chapter 2, 5 and Annex 1).

## Two Categorisations Used in the Study:

### Social Space

Wholesale markets are social spaces where the economic, social and cultural activities are embedded in an assemblage of people, fresh produce, trolleys, laboratory's devices, phone cables, trucks, and so on. In order to understand the importance of the social space at the BACWM, I use Lefebvre's (1991) notion of social space. A social space is a social product or a complex social construction. A social space contains a great diversity of objects. Such objects

are not only things but also relations. So, 'we are confronted not by one social space but by many – indeed, by an unlimited or multiple or uncountable set of social spaces which we refer to generically as social space' (Lefebvre 1991: 88).

Lefebvre attempts to avoid reductionisms by grasping the importance of space according to its manifestations as perceived (physical environment: the BACWM at the Ricchieri Highway), conceived in different ways according to its users (policy-makers, wholesalers, porters, civil servants, buyers, etc.), and lived (social interactions). Furthermore, Lefebvre distinguishes between abstract space and social space. Abstract space is the hierarchical space that is pertinent to those who wish to control social organisation, such as political rulers, economic interests, and planners. The 'abstract' BACWM should be an 'efficient' place according to policy-makers' ideas of efficiency. However, the BACWM is externalised and materialised through action by all its users, even the rulers. The people working from the model of abstract space continually try to reign in and control the social space of everyday life, with its constant changes, whereas the social space always transcends conceived boundaries and regulated forms (Gottdiener 1993). This means that the abstract space is always transforming into places lived by social practices. In other words, the BACWM is an outcome of its complex social relations where abstract and social spaces are shaded. It means that chaos and order can be part of the BACWM at the same time.

In food studies, Murdoch (2006) refers to this conception of abstract and lived spaces as topographical (Euclidean:[15] maps, surveys, projects, well-ordered spaces) and topological (non-Euclidean: social and technological processes of negotiation) spaces. Since these spaces coexist as an expression of a heterogeneous complexity, Murdoch (1998) suggests focusing on social spaces without classifying them in order to examine the process of network construction. Thus, the BACWM is an expression of both spaces shading into one another (see Chapters 5 and 6). These spaces are full of complex social relations that involve struggles within and across domains. There are multiple domains at the BACWM that are continually overlapped. For instance, porters defend their domains as the soul of the BACWM since they are always there, unloading and loading trucks, keeping an eye on wholesalers' stalls or having a barbeque with their colleagues or policy-makers. Although the porters' domain is blurred with other domains through practices, they share particular codes and values that differentiate them from others, such as wholesalers or civil servants (Chapter 3). In other words, both Lefebvre's and Murdoch's

[15] Euclidean space is the Euclidean plane and three-dimensional space (real line, Cartesian plane, and real coordinate space). Within such space, objects may be transported, measured or scaled since objects always retain their spatial integrity. So, the world takes the form of a flat surface that may be broken up into different kingdoms and principalities of varying sizes. However, social relations perform or express different and non-conformable spatialities. Since there was no assumption that an assemblage of relations would occupy a homogeneous and conformable space, it is necessary to analyse social practices in non-Euclidean spaces (Law 1997).

notions of social space help us to understand the BACWM as a non-Euclidean space, where its users deal with uncertainties by constructing networks.

## Marketplace

The term market has more than one meaning. To the historian, sociologist and anthropologist, the market is often the 'market place', a meeting place for the transfer/shift of goods from one's hands to another's. To the economist, the market is a specific institution with rules, a price-setting mechanism, a supply regulation of goods according to the demand, perfect and symmetrical information and competition (Neale 1957). Economists seem to be interested only in price formation and not in the market as a lively place of exchange (Carrier 2005, Fligstein and Dauter 2007, Smelser and Swedberg 1994b, Storr 2007). In classical and neoclassical economics, social relations have been treated as obstacles of 'competitive markets'. Thus, under 'perfect competition' there is no room for negotiating or bargaining (Granovetter 1985, Granovetter and Swedberg 1992, Swedberg 2003).

In his review of economic and sociological approaches to markets, Swedberg (2003) remarks that few economic theories have attempted to overcome the standard neoclassical model. [16] Despite the economists' devotion to methodological individualism, they cannot explain markets as the outcome of individual interactions. They assume that the market is an autonomous and self-regulated arena. Particular social interests are taken as exogenous factors that distort the efficient allocation of resources. For a long time, this abstract conception of the market occupied a key position in economic theory, which explains why concrete markets became invisible and have seldom been studied (Callon and Muniesa 2005).

In the last 25 years, the sociology of markets has made a large effort in understanding the origins and dynamics of markets as social spaces (Smelser and Swedberg 1994a). Market sociologists focus particularly on networks, institutions or social practices in order to understand the emergence and dynamics of markets[17]. As part of the actor-network perspective, Callon and his colleagues (Callon 1998b, 1999, 2007, Garcia-Parpet 2007, Muniesa and Callon 2007) understand markets as performance. They thus search to understand how social practices shape and format markets and the economy in general. In the same line of thought, anthropologists have described and

[16] Swedberg mentions, as examples, industrial organisation theory (Chamberlin 1948 [1933]) and transaction cost theory (Coase 1988, North 1990, Williamson 1994). However, according to Granovetter (1985), neo-institutional economists do not pay attention to different types of personal relations that go beyond markets and contract relationships.

[17] For reviews about markets in sociology see (Fligstein and Dauter 2007, Smelser and Swedberg 1994b, Swedberg 2003). These authors describe different sociological approaches to markets such as network (Baker 1984, Burt 1992, Granovetter 1973, Granovetter 1990b, White 1981), institutional (DiMaggio and Powell 1983, Fligstein 2001, Knorr-Cetina and Bruegger 2002, Powell 1990), and performative (Callon 1998b, 1999, 2007, Callon and Millo 2007, Garcia-Parpet 2007, Muniesa and Callon 2007).

analysed marketplaces by focusing on transactions (Carrier 1997, 2005, Dilley 1992a) and inviting researchers to go beyond oppositional categories such as empirical and abstract markets (Applbaum 2005: 285) or cultural and economic markets (cf. Alexander 1992). By doing the latter, this thesis explains the BACWM through the heterogeneous practices observed in detail in its different sites such as wholesale stalls, bars, market laboratory, canteen, greengroceries, pavilions and street markets. These observations allow researchers to remain sensitive to the presence of a plurality of practices rather than to singular hegemonic patterns (Law 1994).

## Issues of Methodology and Social Interactions

This study attempts to use a method that helps to produce the realities that it describes (Law and Urry 2004), while being aware that there is not just one reality; the reality (in this case the social life of the BACWM) is multiple and produced through diverse and contested social and material relations (Arce and Long 2000b). Thus, these multiple realities need to be studied through methods linked to a phenomenological approach. This is concerned with understanding human behaviour from the social actor's own frame of reference (Bogdan and Taylor 1975, Garfinkel 1986). However, as Arce and Long (2010) point out, fields of inquiry should go beyond the perception of the people under study and take into account their everyday experiences in order to understand the creativity in social actions (Joas 1996). It requires a deep analysis of the complexities of social life involved in social practices and arenas of differences.

In summary, the phenomenological approach needs to be complemented by a pragmatic orientation to social life. This thesis is thus constructed principally through detailed ethnographic research, participant observation in different social situations and information obtained from structured and unstructured interviews. By using ethnography, I attempted to grasp the full range of resources and strategies the users of the BACWM have integrated to face different challenges through the years.

By drawing on Gluckman's (1958) [18] social situations analysis, I closely observed the practices carried out by BACWM's users in relatively circumscribed social, political and economic events, such as commercial activities, produce unloading, meetings at the stall, conversations in the canteen, and so on. These social situations (the front stages and back stages) were the raw material or the 'base-fieldwork-ground' information for analysing the social practices at the BACWM (Kapferer 2006). By moving from a description of events interweaving in a specific time (situational analysis) to an extended case-study, I analyse a series of social situations over quite a long period (from the beginning of BACWM's project to 2008). This allows me

[18] Gluckman's (1958) description and analysis of the official opening of a bridge in an African community in 1935 is a classic example of how to use situational analysis as an analytical tool (Mitchell 2006 [1956]).

to describe events starting some years before I was in the field (for instance, the BACWM creation's process) and continuing after I left the field (May 2008). According to Mitchell (2006 [1956]), the extended case is similar to Turner's (1974) dramas used to analyse crises in the daily life of a single group or community over a considerably long period of time. Thus, the extended case allows studying social processes throughout 30 years of social action (cf. Gluckman 1958, Handelman 2006, Mitchell 2006 [1956]).

According to Handelman (2006), most extended cases are constituted through encounters that influence how the case is shaped. This means that the extended case is the construction of the researcher with the data emanated from social interactions (encounters). Thus, the extended case-study method allows one to construct a theoretical argument that is based on concrete cases. Although the researcher can only generate a partial understanding of reality, he or she can show ethnographic evidences as a 'partial connection of truth' (Strathern 1992 quoted by Arce and Long 2000a, Otsuki 2007, Plummer 1983). The selection of an extended case-study as a method to analyse the complex reality of the BACWM is based on its validity and explanatory power rather than on its representativeness or typicality (Mitchell 2006 [1956]: 37). As Knorr-Cetina's (1981a: 15) explains, this method 'has replaced the model of the individual actor as the ultimate unit of social conduct by a conception which incorporates the reciprocity and the situated character of social action.'

In this research individual biographies were also used (Bogdan and Taylor 1975, Magrassi and Rocca 1986, Plummer 1983). This methodological tool allows investigators to deconstruct actors' actions in relation to their own life experience (Arce 1993a, Long 2001b), and to understand how they are influenced by critical periods in their lives. It means that individual experiences cannot be separated from his or her experiences shared with others (Otsuki 2007). The selection of the individual biographies in the present study was shaped by the research interest in the career of a group of selected social actors at the BACWM and their ability and willingness to verbalise their past. In other words, it is possible to analyse through personal biographies how the environment affects social actors' actions (Granovetter 1985, Smelser and Swedberg 1994b) and how social actors' activities also impact upon other things and persons' actions (Long 2008). To understand these collective impacts, interviews and dialogues were essential information sources.

Besides carrying out 180 interviews with wholesalers or vendors during the first months of the fieldwork, I conducted 74 structured and unstructured interviews both at and outside the BACWM. These interviews were with wholesalers (21), porters and odd-jobbers (15), civil servants (13), a chairman at the BACWM Corporation (1), consultants and experts (13), greengrocers (6) and supermarket procurement officers (5). Although I used the interviews mainly as a tool to acquire 'information', I was advised by other researchers to go beyond this and pay attention to the ways in which people reflect on themselves and others, such as their colleagues, competitors and my

informants. Therefore, it is useful to discern 'how people construct their world of experience from the way they talk about' (Knorr-Cetina 1981a: 7). For instance, moments of dialogue at the wholesalers' stalls or at the canteen allowed me to focus on oral and body expressions that differentiate these actors and their activities across multiple domains. Some wholesalers use slang when they deal with porters and *peones* (Chapter 4), supermarket procurement officers always wear clear/white blouses and only talk with wholesalers (Chapter 6) when they visit the market. These different kinds of practices show the development of diverse conceptions and ways of organising the distribution of fresh produce and the marketplace itself, or of organising a space where very poor people go to have access to food.

I also used secondary data to complement this direct information. For instance, I used FAO reports and a 1973 Ph.D. thesis to explain the creation process of the BACWM (Chapter 2). Maps and reports from different administrative sections of the BACWM (press, laboratory, statistics, planning, contract, service and maintenance) were useful to explain what the BACWM looks like and to 'classify'[19] wholesalers according to their volume and value of sales (Chapters 3, 4 and 7). Mass-media reports helped me to review events that took place some years before or after my fieldwork, and to take into account different points of view about the BACWM as a political place where politicians close their electoral campaigns or national auditors strive to control prices (Chapter 5) or very poor people go for food (Chapter 3 and Annex 1). Since few works about wholesale markets have been published in the last years (Ghezán et al. 1999), secondary data from papers related to the impact of supermarkets into fresh fruit and vegetable distribution in Latin America (Hernández et al. 2007, Reardon and Berdegué 2002, Schwentesius and Gómez 2002) and particularly in Argentina (Ghezán et al. 2002b, Gutman 1997, Gutman 2002) were used to organise the presentation of ethnographic information (see especially Chapters 4 and 6).

## Fieldwork

As a researcher, I was involved in the lives of BACWM's users from October 2006 to April 2007 and from February to May 2008. I strived to take almost everything as a subject of inquiry. I spent long hours at different stalls and at the BACWM administrative building. Each 'maker' of the BACWM deserved my attention; particularly those who were linked with buying and selling fresh fruit and vegetables. Although I did not accept any of their discourses as true, I listened to them with careful attention. Their perspectives allowed me to see the BACWM from their point of view, and their practices allowed me to view the dynamics of conflicts and changes developed in this particular social

[19] This classification is used only as a complement to the observed actions, since the BACWM's wholesalers' and other users' activities are not organised through or motivated by categorical affiliations (small, large or medium wholesalers, for instance) but by the tangible social relations in which they are embedded (Emirbayer 1997): 298-299.

space. The fieldwork was composed of a constant interplay of ideas, observations and interpretations of situations and dilemmas that result from the clash of understandings and values, between different users of the BACWM, including my understanding as a researcher. I followed the advice to balance phenomenology and pragmatism in order to address the practical concerns of life theoretically (Arce and Long 2010).

I started my fieldwork at the BACWM without a specific hypothesis, but with certain questions about how this social space is organised through different social practices. I was also fascinated with following a set of fresh fruit and vegetables. Once I was in the setting, I realised that this choice would limit the study to a particular group of people and thus reduce the complex assemblage generated through each fresh produce. Thus, I decided to extend my research to the world of fresh fruit and vegetables. The wider selection allowed me to interview and to observe non-reluctant social actors who were linked with different kinds of fresh fruit and vegetables. The focus was on social actors' capacities to face changes independently of the kind of fresh fruit and vegetables with which they were involved.

I gained access to the BACWM for this research through a civil servant (my gatekeeper). Thus, my first face-to-face encounter was at the administration building, where I had the opportunity to learn how some civil servants view the BACWM's organisation. On my first day at the BACWM, my gatekeeper offered me an office with a computer and Internet connection to carry out my research. Subsequently, we did a tour around the transactional area, where I talked with a few wholesalers. In order to establish rapport with civil servants, I had lunch with some of them at the canteen. This allowed me to know about the complex relationships developed both within the civil servant domain and with other domains such as wholesalers. Although they (civil servants) did not understand why I had chosen the BACWM as my research subject/object, they made an effort to help me. Our different ways of researching can be illustrated by their 'effort' to give me a place with a computer without understanding my 'effort' to spend long hours at the 'stage', observing the different social practices rather than classifying them.

I entered the transactional area of the BACWM a few days later. Since I wanted to know what the BACWM means to wholesalers, I introduced myself as a researcher and asked questions to each wholesaler or vendor willing to answer. By so doing, I was able to obtain 180 interviews with preliminary data such as ways of supplying, sales evolution, kinds of customers and their opinions about the organisation of the BACWM (where they focused particularly on their conflictive relations with the administrators).

I always carried my field-note book, tape recorder and photo camera. These devices helped me to construct evidences. However, I did not use the tape recorder and camera during my encounters with civil servants. Although they were also part of my research focus, it was difficult to recognise them as such since they were also my colleagues. This means that they are, like me, civil servants, agronomists, researchers and the like. Although I interviewed them, I did not pay attention to their everyday practices until a few months later,

when the process of participation led me to do so. Thus, I had listened to and observed them in their everyday practices, such as their lunch at the canteen. The canteen is a large room where civil servants use pass access to have free meals every day. Although this is part of their salaries, the BACWM Corporation is one of a few state institutions that continues to offer lunch to its employees (see chapter 3). By observing civil servants' interactions and discussions about how the administration of the BACWM is organised and about their relations with colleagues and bosses, I strived to understand the complex relations and networks developed between civil servants, wholesalers and chairmen (see Chapter 5).

At the wholesalers' stalls, I spent hours observing purchases, the practices of the different employees (cashiers, vendors, odd-jobbers, packers and the like), loading pick-ups/vans and unloading trucks, and sharing food or drinks. My participant observation was 'passive'. I was not able to be involved in stall activities. For instance, once I tried to help unloading a watermelon truck. But, since I was unfortunate enough to break one, I was friendly invited to stop helping since my future mistakes could cost economic losses to the wholesaler. This experience showed me as an outsider with lack of knowledge and lack of familiarity with wholesaling activities. However, my prolonged immersion in the daily activities at BACWM's users was one of the better ways to understand how fresh fruit and vegetable distribution is developed at a particular marketplace. My descriptions of wholesale activities have emerged as a result of my observations in the field without taking for granted any assumption (cf. Latour and Woolgar 1979).

I paid particular attention to the moment of purchase, where buyers and sellers exchange products, knowledge and information. They always negotiated prices according to different and multiple variables. In order to understand the motives and meaning of their interactions in a way that buyers did not feel intimidated by my presence, I asked some of them to observe their purchases at the BACWM. These buyers performed as my key informants to go deep into observing the bargaining process between buyers and sellers (see chapter 7).

Besides the experience of being at the place where actions are developed, I learnt that participant observation is not a neutral tool to analyse a social situation. First, although I strived to describe what I observed objectively, my interpretations and selections of what to describe were not objective. Second, my presence in the stalls or in the canteen among civil servants was noticeable for everybody the first days. After some days, they got used to my presence even though they did not understand what exactly I was doing there. Some vendors wanted to help me because I reminded them of their children doing homework for school. Since I was doing my PhD thesis, they correctly inferred that I also had to pass an exam. I understood that 'qualitative observations can contribute with more than just information.' The feelings and experience of the users of the BACWM provided me with relevant data that I was not able to grasp by simple interviews.

Study of the daily reality at the BACWM implies ethnographic work. This anthropological study allowed me to describe how social actors 'are locked into a series of intertwined battles over resources, meanings and institutional legitimacy and control' (Long 2001a: 1). The detailed ethnographic study explores the reshaping of the livelihoods of different social actors through a process of change (Arce and Long 2010). So, it means that, for instance, wholesalers or civil servants are not puppets pulled by powerful external structures. They are social practitioners with capacities to construct and reconstruct the BACWM (Callon et al. 1986, Villarreal 1992), and to produce content and context simultaneously (Callon and Law 1989, Verschoor 1997).

As a researcher interested in understanding diversity, 'multiple realities' and 'heterogeneous and unpredictable nature of social change' (Arce and Long 2010) that are shaped by different actors at the BACWM, including myself as an observer, I followed the wholesalers, civil servants, porters and other actors in their everyday practices (Callon et al. 1986, Knorr-Cetina 1981a, Latour 1987). By doing so, it was possible to open partially the black boxes of social interactions and to understand how these interactions are developed at the BACWM. In short, I aimed at gaining new insights into the process of constructing interactions that play an important role in fresh fruit and vegetable distribution. I did so with civil servants, wholesalers, vendors, buyers, porters and odd-jobbers (Chapter 3, 4, 6, and 7).

## Conflicts Arisen while Writing the Thesis

After spending hours at the fieldwork making close observations, I faced myself with multiple and rich realities from many of the actors researched at the BACWM. This amount of information had to be organised in a written work. This implied a process of reflection between my theoretical readings, my feelings, and the performance and feelings of the social actors that I attempted to understand (cf. Blanco 2009, Moreyra 2009, Otsuki 2007).

Reflexivity refers to the experience between the researcher and the data collected. Reflexivity demands an analytical self-reflection from the researcher to describe and explain phenomena, 'not simply an awareness of the contingency of individual concepts, but the constructed nature of analysis itself' (Woolgar 1988 quoted by Murdoch and Pratt 1993). This reflexive process between my readings and acts observed allowed me to go beyond dualisms such as global and local, modern and traditional, or public and private. For instance, while writing Chapter 5, I needed to de-construct the public and private discourse of my informants in order to reconstruct their discourses in a reflexive way. But, I was not alone in this task. My writings were checked by my supervisors and edited by an English teacher, as well as discussed at seminars. By incorporating some of their comments or suggestions, the process of reflection was opened to others. It is thus possible to consider that the reflection is carried out by a group of people rather than an individual researcher.

The reflexive character of this way of writing allowed me to analyse the BACWM situation without taking sides or distinguishing on a priori grounds between dichotomies (cf. Callon et al. 1986). Thus, I learnt from my informants and readings that there is not just one single reality and that there are no 'modern'/'traditional' or 'local/global' places or ways of doing business as I used to think (Ghezán et al. 2002b, Ghezán et al. 1999).

## Structure of the Thesis

In this research, I have analysed the main problems of social organisation of fresh fruit and vegetable distribution in the metropolitan area of Buenos Aires and have organised them into the following chapters.

**Chapter 2** explores the creation of the BACWM as a constructed process linked to different kinds of social and political interests and motivations. Like other social institutions, the BACWM has grown to possess a reality of its own. An understanding of its historical process of creation allows one to appreciate parts of the complexity of this marketplace.

By analysing social practices (discourses), this chapter focuses on the creation process of the BACWM by answering the following questions: What kind of complex and multifaceted relations of change took place to create a new physical wholesale market? And how is the BACWM constructed and maintained? The social actions embedded in this marketplace can be seen as creative and constructive processes where actors strive to maintain their livelihoods. These practices allow us to distinguish between the market as a principle (determination of price by supply and demand) and its concrete realisation in a specific marketplace.

**Chapter 3** describes both the facilities and everyday practices of particular social groups working at this marketplace. The location of facilities explains the 'abstract space' (Lefebvre 1991) planned by policy-makers, while the description of the people's everyday practices explains the 'space of interactions' or 'space of action' (Arce 2003, Long 2001a). The huge dimensions of the facilities show the important role given to the BACWM as a centre of fresh fruit and vegetable distribution in its beginnings.

This description attempts to situate the reader at the scene where social actors create their own domains. The research questions of this chapter are related to what the BACWM looks like, what kinds of interactions take place at this marketplace, and how 'market-makers' produce/construct this social space through their interactions.

**Chapter 4** gives special attention to wholesalers as the backbone of fresh fruit and vegetable distribution. Wholesalers' capacity to build networks with different kinds of social actors opens up the BACWM to growers, retailers (greengrocers and supermarkets) and food-service entrepreneurs (hotels, restaurants and institutions). Through wholesalers' individual biographies, it is

possible to answer how wholesalers create different ways and strategies to deal with changes in the world of fresh fruit and vegetable distribution.

The main goal of this chapter is to show the heterogeneity and multiple realities at the wholesale level. Thus, the seven biographies selected illustrate and characterise wholesalers' diverse strategies and interpretations of fresh fruit and vegetable distribution. Their everyday practices go beyond their economic interests and show the wholesalers' passion and love for their business.

The **last three chapters** focus on particular social interactions. **Chapter 5** analyses social encounters between the BACWM administrators (civil servants, policy-makers) and wholesalers. In order to know how the BACWM is organised, how different social actors interact and organise the BACWM and why these interrelations end in an environment lacking of trust and collaboration, the concept of social interface is used (Long 1989). The interface stresses the dynamic and potentially conflictive nature of social interactions. The social interface is a critical interaction between different social worlds, in this case between the hierarchy (the BACWM's administrators) and the workers network at the BACWM.

**Chapter 6** focuses on the interactions between wholesalers and supermarket procurement officers to show the evolution of these relationships: how wholesalers transfer and negotiate knowledge with supermarket procurement officers, who have their own high quality and logistic requirements. Specialised wholesalers and supermarket procurement officers cope with the reorganisation of fresh produce distribution in a new competitive space. By giving close attention to their practices, this chapter analyses how knowledge is internalised, used and reconstructed.

By tracking social actors' practices, **Chapter 7** explains the construction of quality through the interactions between wholesalers and their buyers. The two questions that guide the analysis are: How difficult is it to establish an official quality standard? And how do social actors negotiate and construct their own quality standards? By answering these questions, this chapter shows that buyers and sellers exchange not only fresh fruit and vegetables, but also normative and tacit knowledge about quality. By doing so, they construct their own notion of quality according to the buyer's needs. Thus, there are multiple notions of quality at the BACWM. Different commercial circuits like high quality products for acknowledged consumers or standard quality products for low- or medium-income consumers generate a heterogeneous assemblage of quality at the BACWM.

The thesis finishes with some conclusions and discussion to stress the importance of studying complex social spaces by taking into account the social actors' point of view and practices. Being at the BACWM's stage to observe how social encounters influence each other in a wide context allowed me to collect empirical data from everyday practices. However, empirical data itself are not enough to grasp the full significance of social changes in a particular place. It is necessary that researchers connect the social practices

observed in the fieldwork with theory. By balancing phenomenology and pragmatism, this thesis concludes that the BACWM's resilience in a competitive environment is based on the complex and heterogeneous interactions developed between different actors. This complex and shifting assemblage has allowed the BACWM to survive and face diverse crises through the years.

# 2 The Social Construction of the BACWM

*'I wanted to walk around the Abasto market's streets. I wanted to find those tired porters loading heavy parcels. I wanted to meet those old wholesalers, a mix between Calabria and Buenos Aires, showing gold watches without any humility…'*

*'I wanted to come back to that environment of noisy bars where wholesalers and retailers did business, and everybody played cards and lottery… I wanted to find retailers' vans loaded with fresh fruit and vegetables…'*

*Adapted from Caminado aquel Abasto, 16th May 2002*
*www.todotango.com*

## Introduction

This chapter will explore the creation of the BACWM as a socially constructed process linked to different kinds of social actors (policy-makers, wholesalers, porters, growers, buyers and civil servants). The creation of the BACWM was a result of national political intervention. This national project aimed at

improving the distribution of fresh fruit and vegetables in the metropolitan area of Buenos Aires by relocating old wholesale markets such as the 'Abasto wholesale market' from down-town to suburban areas.

By analysing the historical process of the construction, inauguration and developing of the BACWM, this chapter attempts to answer the following questions: What was the creation process of the BACWM like? How do social actors involved at fresh fruit and vegetable distribution make and remake this marketplace? How is this marketplace constructed and maintained (regarding physical architecture, linguistic codes, etc.)? The answers to these questions strive to understand the creation of the BACWM as a process that came into existence to suit both the economy and the requirements of policy-makers. However, this process involved other social performances and interactions – wholesalers, civil servants, porters – which combined degrees of norms and regulations in order to achieve their own needs. Consequently, the BACWM is more than a spontaneous appearance of an economic mechanism carried out by rational and efficient social actors (cf. Garcia-Parpet 2007, Granovetter 1990b).

Policy-makers attempted to create an Euclidean, absolute or topographical space (cf. Law 1997, Lefebvre 1991, Murdoch 1998) oriented to achieving an efficient set of procedures for fresh fruit and vegetable distribution. It seems that policy-makers did not take into account the social actors involved at distributing fresh fruit and vegetables (Frigerio 1973). However, the 'new' marketplace started from existing social relationships, which were disseminated through different old wholesale markets established in several neighbourhoods of Buenos Aires. So, the abstract space created by the authorities was eventually transformed into a 'social space' by social actions (cf. Lefebvre 1991).

Interconnections, displacement, mutual interactions and links between different spatial practices generated contradictions and negotiations that gave content to the policy-makers' relocation plan. In this sense, this chapter uses these different forms of social encounters to understand the marketplace dynamics beyond the abstract concept of policy-makers. The creation of the BACWM can be explained as a card game (Weber 1995 cited by de Raymond 2001: 16) in which players – wholesalers – can follow the rules of the game, but can also transgress these rules. For instance, some wholesalers did not move from the old wholesale markets to the new one (this was possible because, in spite of the law, two wholesale markets have never been closed), others moved into the new marketplace using political connections, while others filled the formal requirements. These social and creative practices show a gap between the law and social activities. This process of settling down in the 'new' marketplace did not take place in a social 'vacuum' (cf. Garcia-Parpet 2007). Thus, this chapter will attempt to explain the creation process of the BACWM from the point of view of the actors' experiences, giving emphasis to policy-makers and wholesalers.

The first part will describe how wholesaling was organised at the metropolitan area of Buenos Aires before the creation of the BACWM. The second part will

explain the process of intervention and the birth of this marketplace as an attempt to have a fruit and vegetable market similar to the Paris Rungis market. The third section will show how wholesale activities lost part of their importance within fresh fruit and vegetable distribution during the 1990s, although the following chapters will show how wholesalers have shown their capacity to remain in the business. The last part will summarise the importance of analysing the social practices going on at the market in order to describe the BACWM as a social space.

## Before the BACWM's

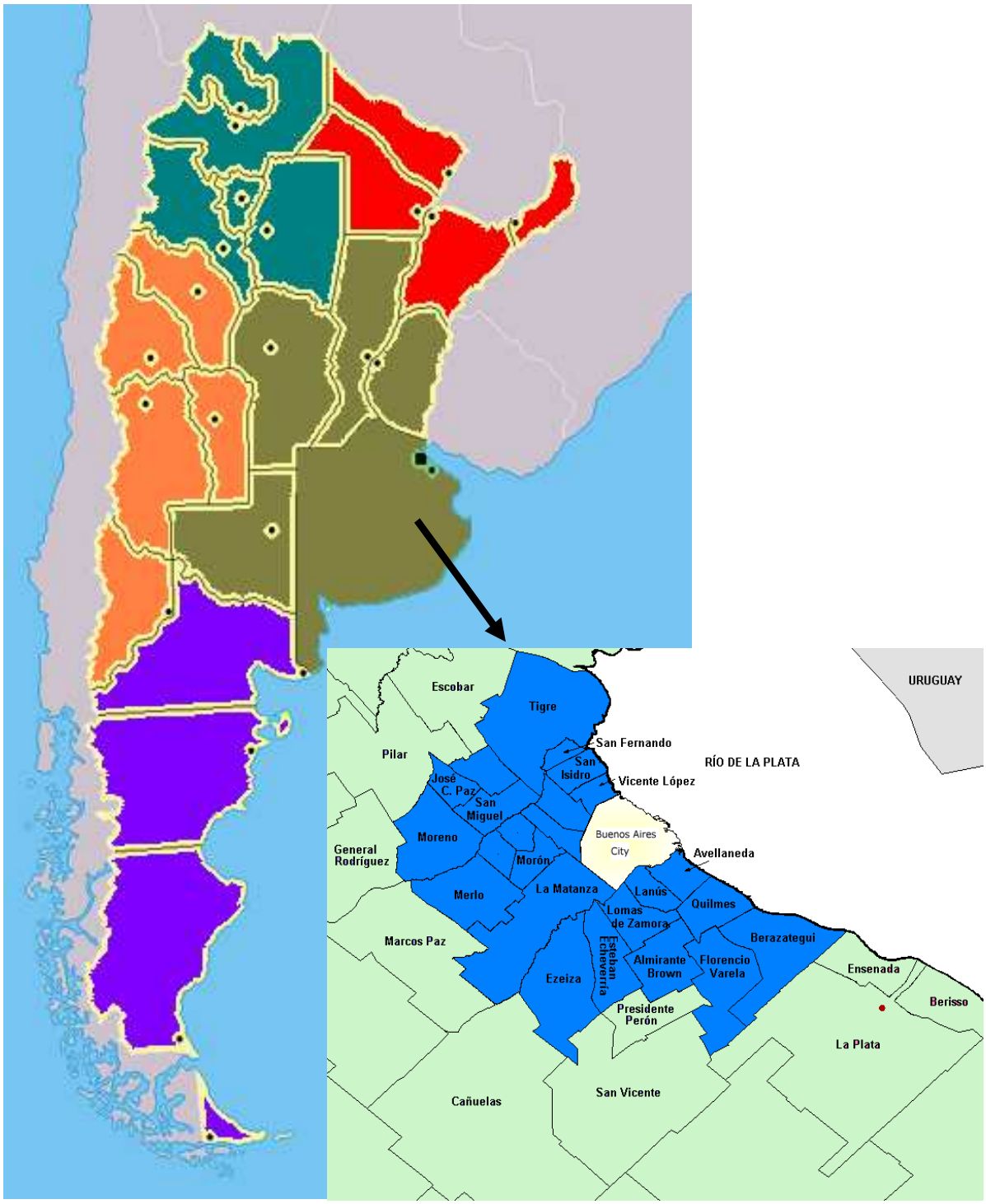
### Main wholesale markets in the Buenos Aires Metropolitan area[20]

The Buenos Aires metropolitan area is constituted by a large population and extends over a huge geographical area composed of the autonomous city of Buenos Aires, and a suburban area comprising partidos or municipalities – which do not constitute a single administrative unit (Map 2.1). In 1970, this area, the cultural and political capital of Argentina, was inhabited by 8,350,000 people and was one of the largest cities in the world. Buenos Aires played an important role in the national economy, absorbing 53% of the people employed and 56% of the value of production. The socioeconomic significance of this space meant that any improvement to the Buenos Aires food supply system could influence the distribution of fresh fruit and vegetables in the rest of the national system (Frigerio 1973: 17).

In the case of the Buenos Aires metropolitan area, the distribution of fresh fruit and vegetables was dominated by the sector of wholesalers operating in 23 markets and in buildings (warehouses) outside of these marketplaces. Eight of these 23 marketplaces were located in Buenos Aires city, while the rest were in the suburban area. Table 1 shows the relative importance of each marketplaces according to their specialisations and volume handled in 1970 (Frigerio 1973) and 1977 (Durand 1997), and Figure 2.1 shows the geographical position of some of these wholesale markets. Frigerio (1973) classifies them into specialised and broad product-line marketplaces. The specialised markets sold a few products coming directly from growers (primary handler markets).

[20] This section is mainly based on Frigerio (1973).

***Map 2.1. Argentina and the Buenos Aires Metropolitan Area***




*Source: Own elaboration based on internet 2007*

***Table 2.1. Fresh fruit and vegetable wholesale markets in the Metropolitan Area***

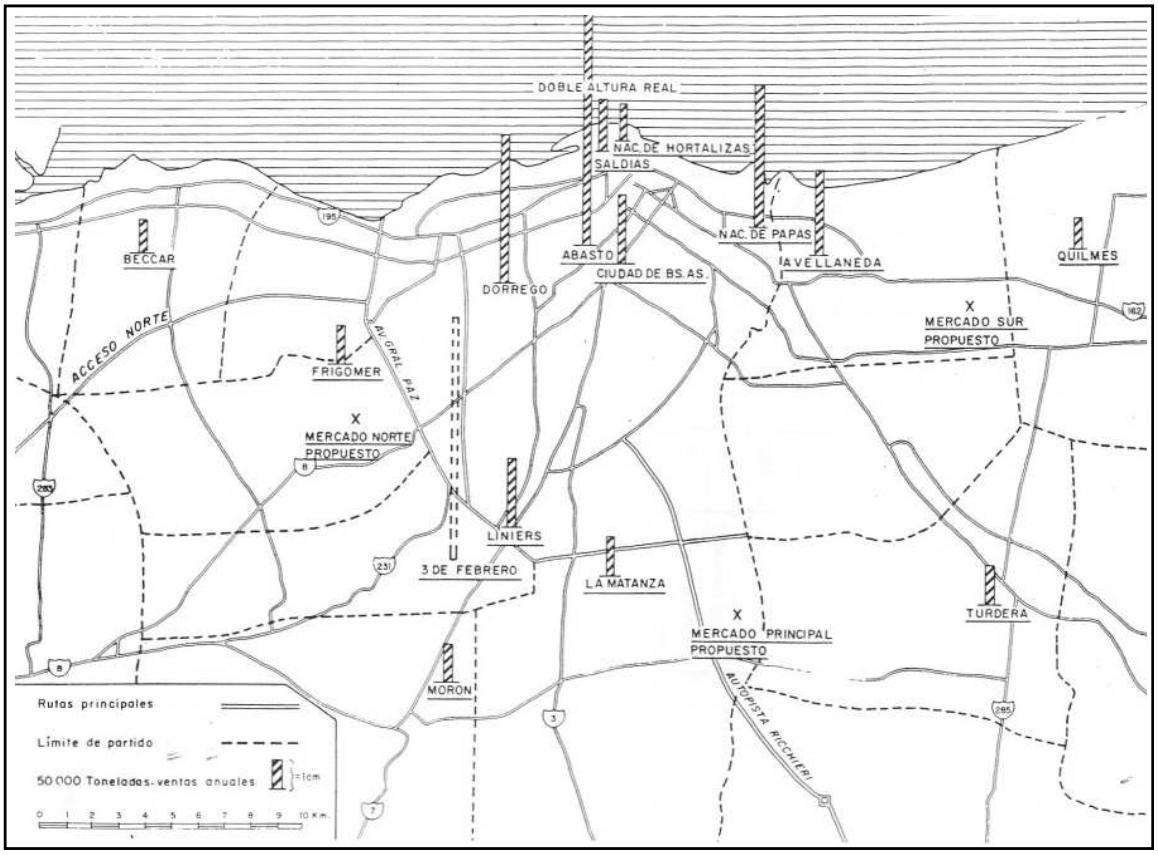
| | Wholesale Markets | Volume (tons/year) | |
|---|---|---|---|
| | | 1970 | 1977 |
| | **I. Specialised concentration markets** | | |
| 1 | Nacional de Papa (in Buenos Aires city) | 209,000 | 350,000 |
| 2 | Saldías (in Buenos Aires city) | 112,00 | 70,000 |
| 3 | Nacional de Hortalizas (in Buenos Aires city) | 58,000 | 70,000 |
| 4 | Provincial de frutos del Tigre | 15,000 | 12,000 |
| | **II. Broad product-line markets** | | |
| | **Large size** | | |
| 5 | Abasto Proveedor S.A. (in Buenos Aires city) | 730,000 | 650,000 |
| 6 | Concentración Dorrego (in Buenos Aires city) | 263,000 | 350,000 |
| 7 | Salón Mayorista Tres de Febrero | -- | 400,000 |
| | **Medium size** | | |
| 8 | Ciudad de Buenos Aires (Spinetto in downtown) | 132,000 | 120,000 |
| 9 | Abasto Avellaneda | 120,000 | 200,000 |
| 10 | Abasto Morón | 80,000 | 70,000 |
| 11 | Frigomer (San Martín) | 16,000 | 70,000 |
| 12 | Abasto Turdera | 25,000 | 60,000 |
| 13 | Abasto La Matanza | 5,000 | 60,000 |
| 14 | Lomas del Mirador | -- | 45,000 |
| 15 | Abasto Quilmes | 15,000 | 40,000 |
| 16 | Valentín Alsina | -- | 40,000 |
| 17 | Liniers | 28,000 | 35,000 |
| | **Small size** | | |
| 18 | Abasto Norte (Béccar) | 23,000 | 23,000 |
| 19 | Ricchi (Morón) | 9,000 | 23,000 |
| 20 | Abasto Vicente López (Villa Martelli) | 2,000 | 14,000 |
| 21 | Intendente Grondona (San Fernando) | -- | 12,000 |
| 22 | Demarchi (in Buenos Aires city) | 4,000 | 6,000 |
| 23 | Velez Sarfield (in Buenos Aires city) | 1,000 | 3,000 |
| 24 | Abasto Lomas de Zamora | 3,000 | 3,000 |
| | **Total Volume** | **1,784,300** | **2,726,00** |

*Source: Frigerio (1973: 102) & Durand (1997: 61)*

The specialised wholesale markets were: Nacional de Papas (known as Casa Amarilla, selling potatoes), Saldías (early season vegetables), Nacional de Hortalizas (vegetables), and Tigre (fruits). Only the Nacional de Hortalizas (vegetables) and Nacional de Papa markets supplied price and volume information (Durand 1997: 73). The Saldías (1962) was privately administered

by a growers' association. This association sold mainly tomatoes, peppers and citrus fruits from the north-west of the country, which arrived in Buenos Aires by rail. Thus, this marketplace was strategically located close to Retiro railway station. The Tigre market (1929) – owned by the province of Buenos Aires – sold fruits from the growers of the Paraná River Delta until 1971.

***Figure 2.1. Wholesale Markets in the Buenos Aires Metropolitan Area (1970)***




*Source: Link 1974*

The broad product-line markets were non-specialised and received products from both growers and wholesalers (secondary handler markets). There was a small number of large fresh produce receivers, most of them located outside wholesale market areas, and a large number of small wholesalers carrying on their businesses in wholesale market stalls and warehouses.

According to some interviewees (Interviews 5, 6, 10, 15, 30, 34), these marketplaces used to generate spaces where power was exercised openly and quite clearly in an asymmetrical form. This was linked to the power position that wholesalers held as mediators between production and consumption, having the opportunity to manage prices by informal arrangements.

Nevertheless, these wholesale markets (which existed until 1984) created places where a variety of social actors used to organise their livelihoods through fresh fruit and vegetable distribution. Although the main actors were the wholesalers, wholesale activities involved interactions with others working in different services, such as food (bars, restaurants, or peddlers), sex (prostitution), lottery and other gamble games. For 'outsiders', this social life was associated with an environment of danger, corruption and even violence. A person who witnessed those times because he used to buy produce in one of these markets comments:

> 'There were brothels at the banana ripeness facilities. Porters paid the police to allow them to work there. So, [as a buyer] I had to deal with it. I spoke neither English nor French, but I spoke the language of porters, wholesalers, and consumers.'[21]

> 'During that time, there were 25 stalls at the Abasto market. This market wasn't controlled. Prices were formed by a few large wholesalers. There were maximum prices, but not minimum ones. Wholesalers negotiated with growers from a position of power. So, the growers had to accept the price and conditions of these wholesalers. Otherwise, wholesalers could say: "If you don't want my conditions, you should go and throw your products away". Some growers travelled 1,000 km to get to the marketplace. So, how could these growers discuss prices with these wholesalers?' (Interview 10, 10 October 2006).

This vignette provides an image of wholesalers as power abusers, without scruples to achieve success. However, other people (Interviews 18, 64, 65, 67, 68) characterised these places differently. In the epigraph of this chapter, a wholesaler's son remembers these markets as working places. He saw the proliferation of these markets, like Saldías, as a solution to avoid the traffic problems of wholesale markets situated in the middle of down-town Buenos Aires. He says:

> 'Saldías was a new alternative to avoid unloading problems at the Abasto market. Under a national and municipal agreement, a group of growers and wholesalers (my father was one of them) opened Saldías in 1963. The commercialisation of fresh fruit and vegetables was always informal. My father, like his colleagues, used to give credit to his customers. The average of bad debt was no more than 3%. So, there were codes. I can say that there were codes rather than norms'.[22] (Interview 64, 28 May 2007).

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[21] This seems to highlight that although this man did not have an academic career, like his colleagues nowadays, he knew from experience how to deal in a particular and difficult environment.

[22] The difference between codes and norms seems to be that norms come from law, while codes are part of the cultural market context. It means that interactions and particular transactions between buyers and sellers (wholesalers) cannot be reduced to economic

This wholesaler's son remarks how wholesalers organised their businesses based on informal relationships. Wholesalers used to give their buyers or customers the opportunity to pay after selling the product at their shops.[23] This transaction operated to the benefit of both, since it secured their position in the flow of trade. In this sense, the activity depended on a balance between supply of the product and how the wholesaler was able to manage the advance of 'credit'. The problem for the wholesaler was how to keep neither too large nor too small a 'credit' balance. The credit had to be large enough to keep the trade relation between them, but small enough to provide some security in case the retailers went bankrupt. 'How large' depended on various factors such as the reputation of the buyer in terms of reliability and his skills as a trader (cf. Geertz 1963: 38). Thus, the wholesaler's activity was not totally free of risk since in several cases buyers were not able to sell products given on credit. Therefore, they did not come back to repay their debts. These kinds of transactions generated intrinsically a degree of instability and variation among wholesalers, who could disappear from the marketplaces because of bankruptcy. In spite of these risks, it seems that a few wholesalers were able to continue in business under those conditions.

At that time, the most important marketplace was the **Abasto** (Picture 2.1), which sold 750,000 tons of fresh fruit and vegetables a year. There were 211 50 $m^2$ stalls, which covered a total area of 14,000 $m^2$. Also, there was a 4,000 $m^2$ basement for fresh produce and package storage. This marketplace was built in 1891, when Buenos Aires city had 700,000 inhabitants. In 1936, the market was expanded since the population had increased to 2,500,000 inhabitants. The main floor was for wholesaling, the second floor for retailing and the two basements for meat sales and banana ripening and package storage respectively (Frigerio 1973: 93).

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motives, but exist in the maintenance of the transactions throughout time, extending these relationships beyond the first encounter.

[23] These kinds of practices continue to operate at the BACM nowadays, showing the high risk linked with this activity.

***Picture 2.1. The Abasto market***

*http://www.buenosairesantiguo.com.ar/mercadoabasto/pages/MVC-896S_JPG.htm*

The opening hours of the Abasto market were regulated by the national government. Trucks were able to unload at night, overlapping with the hours of market operation. Fruit retailers made their purchases from 2 AM to 8 PM, while wholesalers of other markets made purchases from 9 AM to noon. Vegetable sales took place 24 hours a day. This market worked from Sunday to Sunday, with Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays the most active days. Sundays were also busy because of sales made to out-of-town operators and re-shippers. This working schedule implied traffic congestion and a significantly high social cost (Frigerio 1973: 95).

According to Frigerio (1973: 96), two fruit auctions took place at the Abasto market. One took place three days a week in the first basement of the building and was organised by the Argentine Fruits Growers Association. The bulk of these sales were citrus fruits, but apple and pears were also sold. The other auction took place on Anchorena Street, near the marketplace, and was organised by the Argentine Fruit Corporation. The main products were apples and pears, but peaches and prunes were also sold. At these auctions, sellers – as growers and members of these fruit associations – had to sell all or at least a very high proportion of their produce.

These more 'visible forms' of product acquisition seemed to have some particularities. According to an interviewee (Interview 68), both auctions

were carried out without the physical presence of the products. There were only 10 boxes as samples for each product. But, the physical distribution did not necessarily pass by the Abasto wholesale market. Nevertheless, the auction fixed prices for the other secondary handler marketplaces. For instance, Pindapoy (a large citrus firm located in the North East) used to send products already sold at the auction, according to variety and size. Apparently, this company was able to work in that way because of the trust system, which was endorsed by the reputation of the company offering products at the auction. These companies endorsed their brands offering compensation in case their fruits did not arrive in the conditions negotiated at the auctions (Interview 68). According to Gerarduzzi (2000: 33) this modality of auction took place for few fresh produce and were not common activities among wholesalers. In addition, 80% of small growers still depended on the secondary handler wholesale markets to sell their fresh fruit and vegetables and not on 'auctions.'

As the volume of fresh fruit and vegetable sales increased, the Abasto facilities were not sufficient to handle these volumes. Consequently, wholesaling activities extended through the neighbourhood. At one point, the Abasto market operated with 18 important wholesalers that had their facilities outside the market, which covered 7,000 $m^2$ of floor space with sale rooms, refrigerated warehouses, and banana-ripening facilities (Frigerio 1973: 94). Another issue that complicated the Abasto market's operation was that the underground rail tracks that used to move products in and out of the market became out of order in the 1960s (Link 1974).

The **Dorrego** market, which started its operations in 1930, was the second main wholesale market in Buenos Aires city. This marketplace was administered by the Municipality. Although this marketplace had a refrigerated warehouse, it was never used because of administrative problems. The average volume of fresh produce handled by this market was 260,000 tons in 1970 (Link 1974).

In 1971 a growers' cooperative society established a marketplace in **Tres de Febrero**, outside of the borders of Buenos Aires city. Although there was no direct rail access and no farmers' market facilities, this market handled approximately 300,000 tons and competed successfully with other markets.

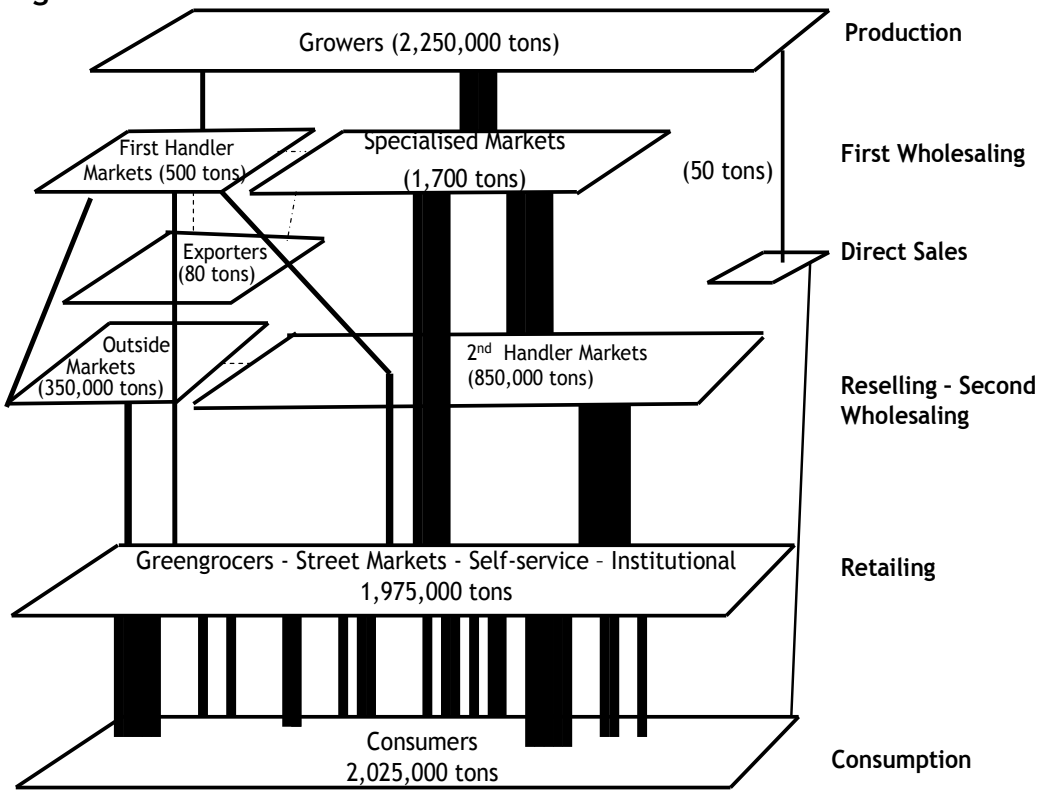
The **medium-sized** markets (Avellaneda, Quilmes, Turdera, Liniers, Morón, Frigomer and Béccar) formed a belt around Buenos Aires city. The Abasto **Avellaneda** (1930) was the main market in the metropolitan area until the Tres de Febrero started to operate. This marketplace was closed after the inauguration of the BACWM in 1984 and was opened again a few days later (Interview 34).

There were other wholesale markets that commercialised less than 25,000 tons a year. These marketplaces were situated strategically for greengrocers who were not able to visit other wholesale markets with a rich variety of products and far away from their shops. Consequently, these markets allowed greengrocers to diminish transaction costs.

## Organisation of Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Distribution

Wholesale fresh produce distribution is a complex net-chain (Lazzarini et al. 2001), where both horizontal and vertical relationships constitute crucial elements to understand the potentials of policy intervention and challenges of the sector (Figure 2.2).[24] According to Frigerio (1973: 104), 2,250,000 tons of fresh fruit and vegetables were introduced in the Buenos Aires metropolitan area in 1970. Seventy per cent (70%) of the total volume was received by commodity-specialised wholesalers located in specialised marketplaces, 22% was received by other primary handlers and the remaining 50,000 tons (8%) by passing wholesalers. Secondary handler wholesale was distributed through wholesalers at marketplaces (75%) and wholesalers with stalls located adjacent to those markets (25%).

***Figure 2.2. Distribution channels in the 1970s***




*Source: Based on Frigerio (1973) and Lazzarini et al. (2001)*

The level of consumption in the Buenos Aires metropolitan area was estimated at 2,025,000 tons (90% of the total fresh fruit and vegetable introduced). The

[24] These data were available because of the project of the 'new' market. Numerous studies were carried out in the 1970s in order to know the volume of fresh fruit and vegetables transacted in the Buenos Aires metropolitan area. Unfortunately, there was no continuity of these kinds of works. Consequently, the updating of this net-chain cannot be presented with volumes. This is also a challenge to fulfil in future studies.

remainder was redistributed in other cities (66%) and exported (34%). The volume sold for consumption by wholesalers was distributed as follows: greengrocers, owners of street market stalls (94%), self-service stores (4%), restaurants (0.5%) and institutional consumers (1.5%) such as hospitals, prisons and schools (Frigerio 1973: 105).

However, the annual volume handled by wholesalers (3,350,000 tons) was much greater than the 2,200,000 tons introduced by primary handler wholesalers. The difference is explained by the numerous transactions that take place not only between primary and secondary handlers, but also between secondary handlers. The volume increased from the primary handling of produce is the effect of reselling produce several times among wholesalers. For instance, the Abasto market sold 29% and the Dorrego market 20% of their volume to wholesalers rather than retailers (Frigerio 1973: 107).

As shown in Figure 3, retailers seldom purchased at specialised markets because they preferred to buy a complete line of fresh fruit and vegetables in large lots at auction markets. These wholesale facilities did not suffer problems of congestion as secondary handler markets did. The latter received a large number of small retailers, who, in order to save time, preferred to buy everything in one place.

Finally, it is worth noting that the product flow diagram may conceal substantial differences in distribution channels by commodities. Fresh vegetables produced in the Buenos Aires green belt tended to move directly from farms to final wholesalers, while fruits coming from long distances tended to go through a two-stage wholesale system, increasing the number of handlers.

By interviewing 240 primary fresh fruit and vegetable wholesale handlers in 1970, Frigerio (1973) noticed a high concentration of banana sellers (five larger firms had 89% of the market share) and a medium concentration of citrus, apple, pear, tomato and pepper sellers. The concentration of potato and sweet potato sellers ranged between low and medium (40% and 30%). Seventy percent (70%) of the entrepreneurs interviewed were specialised in either one product or one type of product and they were larger than less commodity-specialised firms. Most vegetable enterprises were family organisations[25].

By the 1970s, the facilities of wholesale markets were obsolete because of their location and traffic suitability. According to Frigerio (1973: 139), the operational conditions of some of them could have been improved with additional investments, but the operations of down-town wholesale markets (such as the Abasto and Spinetto) needed to be transferred to better locations due to their lack of space and the increasing importance of fresh fruit and vegetable distribution.

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[25] Only 3% of them had administrative employees and 6% had sales employees. In the case of fruit enterprises, more than 15% were large with an average of four administrative employees, two sales employees and three stevedores (Interview 68; Frigerio 1973: 123).

## Constructing a Marketplace

As pointed out above, a public policy action to improve the distribution of fresh fruit and vegetables was needed in Argentina from the 1960s onwards. The fast population growth of Buenos Aires city made commercial activities of the wholesale markets difficult. Heavy traffic, lack of hygiene, and important economic losses caused by the wrong handling of produce were some of the problems to be resolved. Besides logistic disadvantages, it was necessary to reduce the ineffective process of price negotiation, the low level of commercial transparency, and poor access to information (Durand 1997, Frigerio 1973).

In the case of the BACWM, the nation-state was one of the main institutions involved in its process. According to policy-makers, it was necessary to regulate the speculative activities of wholesalers, since wholesalers used to retain a large percentage of the growers' net income (Pons 1988). So, as Frigerio (1973) and Gerarduzzi (2000) point out, the creation of the BACWM was politically motivated by an 'anti-wholesaler mentality'.

The project of the new marketplace was based on the wholesalers' vital function of supply and distribution of fresh fruit and vegetables, which links production and consumption. However, the representation of wholesalers performing parasitic speculative activities was commonplace among policy makers in the 1960s. For policy makers, bad logistics and asymmetric information encouraged wholesalers to develop their own business against the interests of growers. Particular characteristics of the fresh fruit and vegetable sector, such as seasonal supply, lack of size or quality classification, little standardization of packaging and long-time storage failures, together with the lack of good transportation, were factors used by wholesalers to further their own interests. The middlemen were able to use these inefficiencies and incorrect information about sales against growers who were not able to be present during the face-to-face produce transaction. Since both growers and retailers had to rely on wholesalers, the latter were an ´obligatory passage point´ for fresh fruit and vegetable distribution (cf. Callon 1986).

During the 1960s, according to some of the interviewees (Interviews 10, 65, 68), policy-makers were only concerned with wholesalers' speculative activities. So, they focused only on resolving old confrontations between growers and wholesalers. They did not pay attention to other important aspects necessary to improve the fresh fruit and vegetable net-chain, or to the actors' practices or the wholesalers' practical knowledge about commercialisation[26] (Interview 48). However, the historical development of wholesale markets all over the world has been related to the necessity of

[26] This partial vision was not able to go beyond grower and wholesaler confrontation, taking into account other aspects linked to production (giving support to growers in order to organise their sales through cooperatives or other associations), or to retail distribution (alternative marketplaces to avoid the emergence of middlemen between wholesalers and retailers located far away from the BACWM).

moving market facilities from the urban to peripheral/outskirt areas because of traffic problems and the interests of national authorities to control these activities (de Raymond 2001, Green 2003).

From the points of view of some interviewees (interviews 10, 30), the market was a copy of the equivalent project in Paris, without taking into account differences between them. While Paris had only one market (Les Halles) located down-town, Buenos Aires city had four primary handler markets. In the opinion of an expert:

> 'There was no clear project. The Rungis group [referring to experts from France] came to Argentina and sold the idea of concentration in only one market to the military administration. Nobody carried out a feasibility study of this project. In addition, the original projects would have cost U$S 43 million, and it cost U$S 400 million' (Interview 68, 8 January 2008).

Besides the corruption involved in the BACWM's project, it could be seen that the national government preferred to transfer an external experience than to relocate the marketplaces according to local demands. For this, the military administration brought in a French group of consultants who had a particular solution that differed from the opinions of other technicians such as those of the Food Agriculture Organization (FAO) of the United Nations (Link 1974, Mittendorf 1976b).

To achieve an efficient and modern fresh fruit and vegetable distribution, the French experts suggested one single market for the whole of the metropolitan area of Buenos Aires, while the FAO technicians recommended a decentralised system. According to the technical FAO reports (Link 1974, Mittendorf 1976a), Buenos Aires needed more than one single wholesale marketplace, since it was a densely populated city with more than 8.3 million inhabitants in 1970 (INDEC 2002). They considered that the supply of fresh fruit and vegetables had to be close to areas of production, but also to areas of consumption to avoid the commercial monopolising of the product. Part of the logic of marketplace decentralisation was to facilitate easy access to small retailers, in order to contribute to decreasing transport costs. Nevertheless, this proposal was rejected by the national government, who established the project of one central marketplace.

Some interviewees (Interviews 10, 30, 66) attribute the first ideas of a new wholesale marketplace to General Peron's administration (1950–1955), while others (Interviews 15, 30, 34, 37) attribute the initiative to Dr. Illia's government (1963–1966). However, it was the military administration (1966–1970) that carried out the project to achieve an efficient and modern fresh fruit and vegetable distribution. The military administration preferred the construction of a single market rather than a decentralised system in order to control the commercial activity in an easy way. Julio Álvarez, the architect who brought the idea of a centralised place after visiting various important cities of Europe and the United States, put the project into practice, and an agreement between national, provincial and local authorities for the creation

of the Corporation of the BACWM (National Act 17422, Buenos Aires Provincial Act 7310 and Buenos Aires City Hall Decree 22817) was signed on 10 August 1967.

The Corporation objectives were to plan, build and manage a new marketplace under a legal framework in the outskirts of Buenos Aires city. The Corporation expropriated 549 hectares in Greater Buenos Aires. About 210 of these were devoted to the wholesale market, whereas the remaining 339 hectares were reserved for the future expansion of the market and market-related activities.

The new marketplace had to achieve the following goals: reduction in retail produce prices, increase in farm prices and greater price transparency of transactions. By modifying the structure of produce wholesaling, national authorities aimed to eliminate secondary wholesalers without taking into account unemployment problems. In order to assure price transparency, the project had to concentrate products, buyers and sellers in one wholesale facility. Thus, Decree 26795/1972 established a 60 km perimeter of competitive protection for 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. It was a compulsory concentration (Densley and Sánchez-Monjo 1999, Durand 1997).

Frigerio (1973) considered that although this compulsory concentration could give a monopolistic position to the BACWM, its location and concentration of buyers and sellers could reduce distribution costs. Thus, he analysed the economic feasibility of the new wholesale market by taking into account some indirect operational costs. In spite of the perimeter of competitive protection, the service of secondary wholesale handlers did not disappear. This service could be required by retailers who were located far away from the BACWM and who used to purchase a relatively low volume of fresh fruit and vegetables.

In addition, many retailers preferred to be supplied by truck-jobbers than to be forced to travel farther and deal with large specialised wholesalers when they needed to purchase a small amount of produce. Although, on the supply side, growers found advantages in having only one wholesale market, other investments such as grading and additional marketing services in the production systems (hydro-cooling, washing, brushing, waxing, etc.) seemed to be necessary. However, this would imply a national programme for improving the horticultural sector.

According to Frigerio (1973), policy-makers believed that the BACWM's project constituted the solution for an efficient policy administration. By centralising transactions, the new wholesale market could resolve economic and technologically intrinsic problems of selling and reselling fresh fruit and vegetables. Thus, it was a simple solution to a complex process. However, policy-makers preferred to transfer external ideas from Europe without paying any attention to the potential difficulties pointed out by FAO technicians

(Gerarduzzi 2000). In spite of these different views, both French and FAO projects shared the idea of moving the old wholesale markets to the outskirts. In any case, those displacements involved a degree of resistance from wholesalers.

## The White Elephant Starts Operating

The Buenos Aires Central Wholesale Market was started to be built in the 1970s under the National Interest Market Act Nº 19227/1971. This Act promoted the creation of a public market that could serve as an incentive to open a wholesale market network in Argentina's large urban areas.[27] As mentioned before, the ultimate goals were: i) to form competitive prices (commercial transparency), ii) to establish a fluent information system for growers, iii) to supply the urban population properly, and iv) to eliminate unnecessary distribution stages (Durand 1997). The idea of improving the fresh fruit and vegetable distribution was born in the 1960s, but the facilities started to be built in the 1970s and the BACWM was finished in 1982 (Picture 2.2). Official inauguration took place under a democratic government in 1984.

***Picture 2.2. The Buenos Aires Central Wholesale Market***

*Source: Google's map*

[27] This idea of networking came from the *Marchés d' Intérêt National* (MIN) of France.

This huge infrastructure is ironically known as the 'white elephant'. According to politicians and consultants, the solution took more than 30 years, while other countries such as Brazil built 25 wholesale markets in the same period. In addition, this marketplace has almost never fulfilled its objective of improving the wholesale operations (Interviews 67, 68, 78). Gerarduzzi (2000) points out that the ignorance about the sector led the national authorities to make many mistakes. It seems that the centralisation of fresh fruit and vegetable distribution seemed to be a good idea at the wrong time. With regard to this issue, one of the witnesses says:

> 'The main arguments were infrastructure and traffic jams, but indeed the main objective was public control. In the 1970s the idea of a modern building (sanitary controls, light, sewage, easy modern access, etc.) was excellent; but it was implemented in 1984. Too late' (Interview 64, 28 May 2007).

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: 226). Although some wholesalers' associations (potatoes and onions) moved to the new building in 1983, the centralisation process was problematic. Wholesalers decided to go on strike because they claimed they would lose the customers who used to buy at the old wholesale markets. Nevertheless, the strong will-power of politicians and growers prevailed and the BACWM started its commercial activity on the night of 14 August 1984. One of the witnesses of the BACWM's inauguration recalls:

> 'At that moment I was young and so naive that I thought the idea of centralisation was a very good one. I was one of those who weren't able to listen to the wholesalers who were against the centralisation; we called them 'greengrocer mother country'[28]. But they were right. They knew that it was very dangerous to leave projects to politicians who didn't know about social practices. However, wholesalers made a mistake by prolonging their strike for more than one day. They had to go on strike only for one day to show their power. After some days, growers and porters wanted wholesalers to stop striking. Growers wanted to continue selling their products and porters needed to load and unload trucks to earn money. So they forced wholesalers to start working again'. (Interview 6, 4 May 2007).

Networks of different kinds of relationships (social, political and power) were constructed alongside the BACWM creation process. As in other markets (Bestor 2004), different cultural lives and political fights were embedded

[28] The term 'greengrocer mother country' refers to social differences between stock-breeders (cattle oligarchy) and fresh fruit and vegetable growers. The former were always part of the establishment. Hence, state organisms in charge of promoting modernisation, like the National Institute of Agricultural Technology (INTA), were interested in agriculture and livestock rather than horticulture (Gerarduzzi 2000).

within the BACWM. One of the wholesalers explains how he experienced the new codes of change and how he built his own space at the BACWM:

> 'The objective was to close the old 23 markets. Though the idea was conceived by the military government, it was inaugurated by the first democratic administration (after the military coup of 1976–1983). We used to work 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 stall very far away from the busy part of the market. In that place we couldn't sell anything. So I told my nephew: 'I'm not coming here tomorrow. If you want, we load our truck very early in the morning and then, we can look for a better place'. And so we did. We were looking for a new place when I met a young guy from the old 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 stall to a metallurgical company that had political contacts and achieved to rent a stall there. We worked under these conditions until 1992, when the Market Corporation gave us an official stall.' (Interview 18, 7 December 2006).

This wholesaler's journey from stall to stall shows how wholesalers, in spite of their disagreement to move, created and recreated new relationships with old and new colleagues in order to generate their own space for doing business. Another wholesaler explains how he started:

> 'My father in law and his partners had decided not to move their stall from the old market to the new one. So I decided to rent a stall myself since their suppliers (growers) were committed to sending me their produce to the BACWM. The BACWM was inaugurated just when the militaries resigned as national authorities. As it always happens in policy matters, many stalls were already assigned to militaries' friends or relatives. This was the reality. I had to work at a stall that belonged to a military man who had a place because of his political connection, while growers were not able to have any position at that time.'
>
> 'My problem of sharing the stall with the military man was his lack of knowledge about the horticultural sector and his irresponsibility. After two months we started fighting. He didn't want to send back part of the money from sales to our suppliers. So, growers who had relied on me got very angry with me. They wanted to kill me. It was very difficult for me to explain him how wholesalers work.' (Fieldwork note 48, 5 May 2007).

Although both wholesalers interviewed needed a political guarantee to assure a stall, others (interviews 13, 19, 72) explained that they had to meet formal requirements linked with their business performance (investment capacity,

network of suppliers committed to send their produce to him, and so on). Growers with a stall at *Playa Libres*[29] had to prove they managed an orchard or a market garden and that they were able to produce enough volume (Gerarduzzi 2000: 95). In some way, this promoted associations between growers and wholesalers.

In spite of these formal and informal ways of starting, the everyday practices of these wholesalers showed that the BACWM was not the market planned by policy-makers. Wholesalers remarked of the idea of the state against the activities of middlemen, with the following slogan: 'Production: YES; Bloodsuckers like wholesalers: NO.' Hence, wholesalers nowadays still believe they were forced to be regularised. 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)' (Interview 11-22 December 2006).

Most of the wholesalers interviewed confirmed the existence of tensions between their own wishes (maximise return) and the state's goals, such as the control over economic transactions and distribution. The result was a meeting of different cultural traditions, where each actor had his/her own point of view. It seems that this endless confrontation is linked with the incapacity of policy-makers and wholesalers to construct social knowledge together and thus achieve a better understanding of problems linked with fresh fruit and vegetable distribution.

After 25 years since the BACWM's inauguration, some civil servants and consultants still consider that the best solution was a single wholesale market. However, they do not agree with the intervention process. According to them, policy-makers have ignored the social life and the conflictive relationships between the different actors in fresh fruit and vegetable distribution. One civil servant, who works at the BACWM administration, pointed out:

> 'The idea of the market was spectacular, the problem is people. Chairmen, for instance, do not know anything about markets; they are politicians and come here only to get the revenues' (Interview 10, 10 October 2006).

Although the image of the state as the only legitimate body for intervening in legal issues and food commercialisation is still questioned, both wholesalers and civil servants shape and reshape this marketplace feeling part of the process of modernisation. Also, porters (*changarines*) had to internalise the new regulations of the state. Before the BACWM, porters were not organised in any union. In order to provide them with health and social insurance, the authorities forced porters to associate in co-operatives and wholesalers to hire porters from these co-operatives. Since these co-operatives, which are situated in each pavilion, are in charge of unloading trucks arriving at pavilions, wholesalers working at *Playas Libres* are free to hire other porters

[29] *Playas Libres* are half-roof pavilions (for more details see Chapter 3).

who do not belong to any union. So, both kinds of organisations have coexisted at the BACWM since then.

According to Gerarduzzi (2000: 107), the new facilities were not adapted for wholesaling since each pavilion and *playa libre* was a market itself. Since *Playas Libres* are in the middle between pavilions (see Picture 2.2), they slow down the circulation of merchandise and are not suitable to conserve fresh produce in good conditions (interviews 15 and 33). However, by wandering through different pavilions, retailers were able to find good prices and quality. Nevertheless, this advantage was not transferred to price consumption because of the cost asymmetry mentioned above (Frigerio 1973). Retailers located close to the BACWM did not have high costs of transportation like other retailers who were not able to visit the market and had to modify their purchase strategies. These social practices generated new jobs for assemblers who were in charge of buying products at the BACWM and distributing them to different greengroceries. Consequently, secondary handler markets were not really eliminated, putting up the retail price.

For the first three years, the BACWM worked under centralised payment. The system aimed to assure growers to receive money back after commercial operation through bank transfer. The first products sold by this regime were potatoes, garlic and onions. A civil servant explained the system as follows:

'First, wholesalers negotiated their commission with growers, signing three written statements with the percentage of the commission and bank account number. Then, when a retailer bought produce, he had to go to the administration building, where there were different banks, and deposit the money in each bank account according to the statements signed. This was a perfect system, since growers did not need to worry about uncertainties of being paid.' (Interview 10, 10 October 2006).

Although the system seemed to be 'perfect', its implementation was not easy. According to Gerarduzzi (2000: 113), this system was a control element with technical difficulties, since banks were not ready to operate efficiently. Operational problems led growers to wait for more than 50 days to receive their money. In addition, the system was not exempted from invoice adulterations from retailers, which damaged the business of both wholesalers and growers. According to a civil servant interviewed, the basic problem was related to the impossibility to buy on the black market. Nevertheless, when the authorities cancelled the system because of operational difficulties, there were problems of payment between wholesalers and buyers. Thus, some wholesalers remember the system nowadays as an excellent guarantee of payments (Interview 79).

The centralisation of fresh fruit and vegetable distribution aimed at having a concentration of supply in order to achieve 'perfect' competition, where the BACWM could be a price reference marketplace. To do so, an auction system was implemented from 1987 to 1997 (Interview 15). Auctions were carried out in the administration's auditorium and in pavilion S2 (see Map 3 in Chapter 3). There were different sales-auction methods. Fruits used to be sold taking into

account their packaging, variety and size and based on the prestige of the different brands, which was in turn related to the exportation of such fruit (Gerarduzzi 2000). The auctions started with a reference price. The auctioneer diminished this price until he/she received a first demand. Then, buyers bid prices. The buyer who offered the best bid had the possibility to take the whole volume bid or only part of it. So, the rest of the buyers had the possibility to buy part of the product at the same price. If the auctioneer did not find any bidder or the price was inconvenient, he/she was able to take the product out of the auction. The main buyers were wholesalers, large retailers and supermarkets.

As shown before, auctions were very important until the 1990s. They were born with the early-season vegetables produced in the north-west of Argentina. The whole supply was sold by auction in Abasto and Saldías wholesale markets. So, they worked as price references. Nevertheless, when the auctions were moved to the BACWM in 1984, their functions were not so clear. Gerarduzzi (2000: 117) considers that the overlap between wholesalers and retailers, bidding for the same product, modified the auction role as a reference price. In addition, 1990s' favourable exchange rate allowed growers to invest in technology (such as greenhouses and/or drip irrigation). So, growers from other geographical regions started to compete with the North-West early-season vegetables, by sending their products directly to wholesalers. In the case of fruit growers, they also decided to by-pass auction because of the payment problems. In addition, supermarkets changed their supply chain by buying directly from large growers. Consequently, the auctions lost their role as a price reference (Interview 15).

According to one of the wholesalers interviewed, the BACWM has lost part of its primordial function as a real reference price since nowadays it handles around 30% of the national production of fresh fruit and vegetables while it used to commercialize more than 70% (interview 62). Another wholesaler (interview 9-39) pointed out that his enterprise used to receive more than 80% of Argentinean fruit and vegetables production, and these days they estimate to handle only 40%. It can be related to the poor positive evolution of the volume commercialised at the BACWM from 1985 to 2008. According to official data, the average was 1,400,000 tons a year without high increasing (MCBA 2009). The decrease of sales is mainly attributed by wholesalers to changes in consumer preferences: 'They prefer yogurts to fruits', said a wholesaler (interview L3-26). This comment shows that, since the BACWM's beginnings, wholesalers have had to face different challenges. Part of these changes will be summarised in the following point.

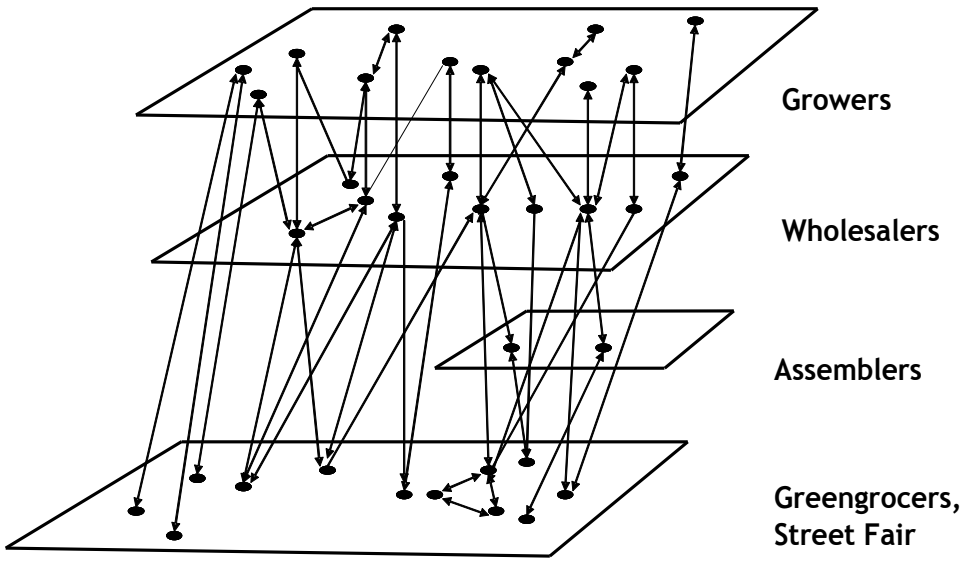
## The 1990's: Dreadful Decade for Wholesaling

Until the beginning of the 1990s, most of the sales of fresh fruit and vegetables in Argentina were carried out by growers, wholesalers and assemblers to retailers (Figure 2.3). Growers sold their products to a wholesaler with a stall in a wholesale market. Wholesalers charged a

commission to sell growers' products to shops. The growers were also able to sell directly in the wholesale market (renting stalls daily in *Playas Libres*) and some of them even became wholesalers. To a lesser extent, growers sold directly to consumers via street fairs in some large cities. Finally, in spite of the 60 km perimeter protection surrounding the BACWM, there were wholesalers operating outside, buying from growers and selling to shops in small towns.

In this net-chain (Lazzarini et al. 2001), wholesalers received produce from growers, alongside their own production. They were able to pay growers directly or after a wholesale transaction by charging a commission (12%) for their services. The first modality was usually applied to shortage products, while the second one was applied for most of the other products. Wholesalers frequently assembled, sorted and graded their bulk quantities of produce in order to resell them to their main clients: retailers (owners of greengrocers, stall-holders at street markets and municipality fairs), industries, other wholesalers, brokers, assemblers and institutional users. After prices had been determined, wholesalers paid their suppliers. So, vertical wholesalers' relationships were based on supply and demand of products at the market place, without any kind of formal loyalty along the distribution process. Although wholesalers did not consider themselves as a consolidated group, they used to exchange merchandise among themselves in the case of necessity or a good deal.

***Figure 2.3. Fresh Fruits and Vegetable Distribution until 1990s***

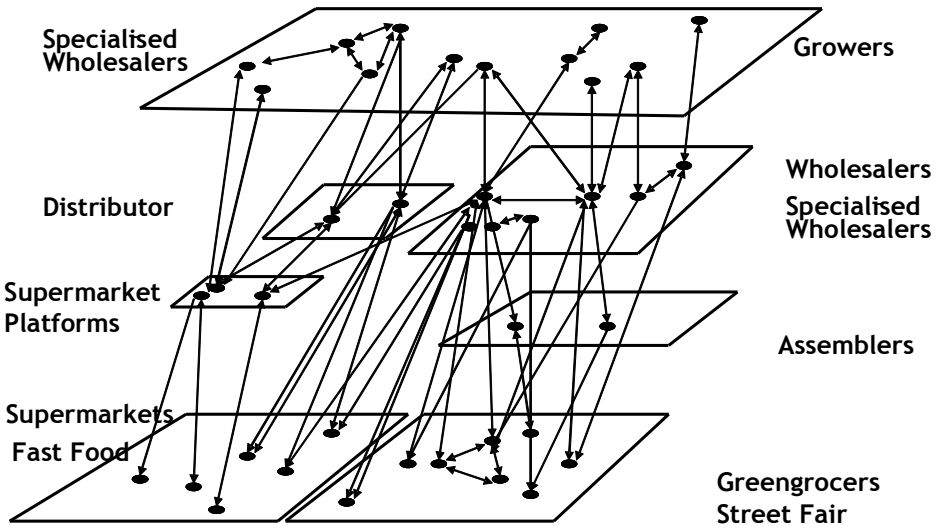



*Source: Based on Lazzarini et al. model (2001)*

As already mentioned, alongside the BACWM creation process, a network existed of different kinds of social, political, and power relationships, showing how wholesalers experienced and faced new challenges (Viteri 2007, 2009). While wholesalers were starting new business at the new BACWM, supermarkets started to settle in Argentina. At the beginning, wholesalers were in charge of providing fresh fruit and vegetables to supermarkets (for more details, see Chapter 6). So, the net-chain was not transformed until the supermarket expansion in the 1990s.

Some wholesalers started to invest in logistics and services to satisfy the high requirements of these 'new' social actors. They organised their own networks of suppliers more systematically than in previous years, in accordance with the seasonality of products. Hence, they had to interact with growers in different geographical areas. In addition, some of them started to integrate primary production and to improve their logistics to become independent of the other suppliers. On the other hand, supermarkets also began to invest in logistics such as computer systems, just-in-time sourcing, and EDI (Electronic Data Interchange between retailers and suppliers). Besides the fact that a few wholesalers became specialised wholesalers, new actors, such as distributors, became involved in supermarket procurement demands. These distributors received and produced fresh food to supermarkets and other food chains (Ghezán et al. 2002a, Gutman 1997, Gutman 2002). The expansion of the networks rendered a more complex fresh fruit and vegetable distribution (Figure 2.4).

***Figure 2.4. Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Distribution after the 1990s***




*Source: Based on Lazzarini et al. model (2001)*

Established actors continued to play a role as distributors or growers, but some of them added new functions, such as supplying supermarkets and fast-food restaurants (Cadilhon et al. 2003, Green et al. 2006). With the expansion of those new actors, there was a rise in direct sourcing (not solely via wholesale markets), facilitated by specialised wholesalers, growers or distributors.

Although most of the wholesalers at the BACWM were involved in selling produce to supermarkets in the mid-1980s, only a few wholesalers were able to continue supplying supermarkets in those days. Thus, these specialised wholesalers had to increase their own primary production by arrangements with partners to compete with new actors, such as distributors or large growers, who started to supply supermarkets in 1995 (for more details, see Chapter 6).

These transformations brought about economic concentration among wholesalers. Nowadays, 30% of the value sold at the BACWM belongs to 5% of wholesalers, showing that few social actors (7%) are able to sell frequently to large buyers such as supermarkets or fast-food restaurants. According to statistics (MCBA 2007), the value of business of these specialised wholesalers was over 2 million Argentinean pesos (€ 400,000) a year, offering more than 700,000 produce boxes only at the BACWM. This amounted to six times the average volume of the BACWM. However, other wholesalers – who were not able to meet new customer requirements – searched for other alternatives related to the different and multiple ways of distributing fresh fruit and vegetables to greengrocers (see Chapter 7). Some wholesalers who went bankrupt, however, continued working as vendors or greengrocers. In some ways, they also show certain resilience. A paradigmatic example given by a witness (Interview 64) is that only one descendant of the 45 wholesalers who moved from Saldías market to the BACWM in 1984 is still working successfully, while others – who used to be large wholesalers – are working as greengrocers (for more examples, see Chapter 4).

The expansion of supermarkets and the new flow of immigrants working in production, wholesaling and retailing sectors have driven to profound changes and have imposed different logics of supply (Feito 1999). Supermarkets and immigrants have generated new and complex social networks, positioning the BACWM at different levels. While wholesale activity was the central point of fresh produce distribution in the 1980s, it seems that supermarkets started to command this net-chain through quality protocols and formal agreements with suppliers in the 1990s. As will be explained in Chapter 6, few wholesalers at the BACWM were able to become specialised. Thus, during the 2000s, many academic papers (Balsevich et al. 2003, Farina and Machado 1999, Ghezán et al. 2002a) remark on the deep crisis of wholesale activities. Nevertheless, social practices have shown a certain resilience of this old activity (Cadilhon et al. 2003, de Raymond 2007, Dirven and Faiguenbaum 2008). In the particular case of the BACWM, the resilience is linked to Bolivians, Peruvians and Koreans working in different activities along the net-chain. These new immigrants, along with the traditional Italian and Portuguese retailers, have

revitalised the BACWM activities. However, most of them also buy in other wholesale markets, thus increasing even more the complexity of fresh produce distribution (see other wholesale markets in Chapter 5).

Although these small wholesale markets are not modern and sophisticated facilities, they are an expression of a different ways of doing business within the fresh fruit and vegetable net-chain. Most of these marketplaces are in the hands of Bolivians (Picture 2.3), who already have an important presence in different green belts in the main cities of Argentina. They started as *medieros*[30] and nowadays they are in charge of their own market gardens (Benencia 1997). Since they have constructed an important kinship network, they have also extended their economic activities beyond fresh fruit and vegetable production, by exploring commercial activities such as retailing and wholesaling.

***Picture 2.3. At a Bolivian wholesale market***

*Source: MLV*

[30] In horticulture, the *medieria* is a labour association between unstable work and Bolivian migration. Bolivians contribute with their labour and the landlord contributes with land, technology and financial capital. The *medianero* receives between 25% and 40% of the sale prices (Durand 1997).

Bolivian women started selling garlic, lemons, beans and peas in the streets, near supermarkets. Then, through their family and friend nets, they began to run their own greengrocers (Gerarduzzi 2000:131). Bolivians and other immigrants are the new buyers at both the BACWM and other wholesale markets. Their way of buying arouses different and ambiguous feelings among wholesalers. One of them says:

> 'While supermarkets were sending us back their costs of inefficiency [referring to the political issues of supermarkets, see Chapter 6], Bolivians, Chinese and Koreans started to engage in retailing. Of course, in this country where policy doesn't exist, nobody asks Bolivians to grow according to regulations like the Portuguese and Italians. In addition, they are family entrepreneurs, saving labour costs. So, Bolivians achieved good performance.' (Interview 29, 26 December 2006).

This wholesaler differentiates between Bolivians and European growers with certain negative prejudices against the visibility of the Bolivians' success in a context of economic crisis (cf. Benencia 2004). Although the wholesaler interviewed considers that all Bolivians work in the black market, he recognises their know-how for doing business in the fresh fruit and vegetable industry. So, he emphasises:

> 'Bolivians expanded their jobs into commercial activities. Nowadays, Bolivians manage 50% of the retailing sales at the BACWM. They do quality control at the moment of transaction. They create a virtuous circle by buying good quality and selling at convenient prices; besides they pay in cash, which allows us to transfer money to growers immediately.'
>
> 'Working with fresh fruit and vegetables is like working with mutants. These products change from one day to another. So it is not a business for inexperienced people. Thus, I believe Bolivians are good retailers. They test the merchandise. They know about fruit and vegetables, so they pay for good quality. They are not used to buying cheap. They remind me of the old retailers, when they came to my stall 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 supermarket nowadays; today nobody knows what a melon is.' (Interview 29, 26 December 2006).

It seems that Bolivians are visible actors at the BACWM, shaping a new way of doing business. This causes different reactions of their colleagues and wholesalers (Viteri 2009). During a conversation with a vendor (A) and his customer (B), I was able to listen to their opinions about Bolivians:

A: 'Che [an Argentinean expression for addressing someone] she [referring to me] is asking me about changes at the BACWM since 1996. Yes, I can tell her that nowadays everybody is Bolivian. Do you know what's going on? They do not use soap; they eat left-overs; 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: [referring to Bolivians] 'Men don't work; women do.'

This conversation, which is full of prejudices since both actors' opinions are not based on knowledge about how Bolivians work or live, shows literally that they envy them. The customer even expresses his feelings ironically. Many people believe that they are nomadic, undocumented and dirty people. However, other perspectives come from Bolivians themselves. A Bolivian woman who buys frequently at the BACWM explains how she started:

> 'I was born and raised in Bolivia. My husband and I decided to come here because of the economic crisis in Bolivia. I was 28 years old when I came in 1994. I started with my greengrocery one year ago. Although I had finished primary and secondary school, I worked first as a maid at family houses, because when we arrived we had to start from scratch' (Interview 18 B, 14 December 2007).

Bolivians learnt how to do business in spite of the unfriendly environment that they found and still find in Argentina. Their knowledge gained the respect of vendors. Vendors know that most Bolivians buy in group and exchange price and quality information of different stalls and pavilions. So, by constructing their own social network, Bolivians are able to do business in spite of the Argentineans' xenophobia.

## Conclusions

By analysing everyday practices at the BACWM and taking into account historical situations (Gluckman 1958, Handelman 2006, Mitchell 2006 [1956]), this chapter has shown that the 'perfect market' planned by policy-makers does not exist. The BACWM is the outcome of multiple interactions between heterogeneous social actors, such as policy-makers, porters, civil servants, etc. While the national government invested in warehouses, pavilions, an auction room, a laboratory and other facilities in order to constitute a 'perfect market', wholesalers involved in economic transactions developed a marketplace full of different kinds of knowledge and ways to achieve profit. Consequently, the BACWM is not only a place for the physical circulation of products, but also a place that implies networks of different localities, embodying consumers, growers and retailers (cf. Hubbard and Kitchin 2004). These social networks constantly make and remake this marketplace through diverse kinds of power relationships. This way of understanding the BACWM allows situating economic activities in these wider networks of personal relations rather than in anonymous ones (cf. Bestor 2004, Callon 1999, Granovetter and Swedberg 1992)

This chapter has also shown that the BACWM has been changed by different political interventions (centralisation/decentralisation) 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. The BACWM's origins show different counter-tendencies, which cannot be analysed by a simple categorisation. Counter-tendency implied different answers to processes such as a perimeter protection or economic crises. Even though one cannot be so ambitious as to strive to understand the totality of this social space and its counter-tendencies, through social actors' discourses and practices, it was possible to understand the BACWM as a multiple, contested, fluid and uncertain place (cf. Arce and Long 2000b, Hubbard and Kitchin 2004).

By seeing the process of transformation at the BACWM from the actors' points of view, this chapter attempted to open partially the black box of these multi-realities and contested practices. It means focusing on multiple forms of power rather than on only institutionalised power (Foucault et al. 2007). The social actors' multiple answers to different interventions make and remake the BACWM and transform the circulation of fresh fruit and vegetables. Hence, the BACWM can be a space of global resistance and a global partner at the same time.

To sum up, by focusing on the social and cultural relationships developed at the BACWM one can understand economic activities beyond abstract spaces. Social interactions carry out an important role in the social life of the commodities, the configuration of prices, the quality control and the construction of multiple powers. Thus, the following chapters will continue to analyse the BACWM and fresh fruit and vegetable distribution by enacting the social. By so doing, the BACWM becomes a non-Euclidean, lived and topological space (Law 1997, Lefebvre 1991, Murdoch 2006) rather than a flat and abstract one.

# 3 Constructing Social Life at the Buenos Aires Central Wholesale Market

*'We must keep in mind not only the capacity of state simplifications to transform the world but also the capacity of the society to modify, subvert, block and even overturn the categories imposed upon it' (Scott 1998:49).*

## Introduction

The aim of this chapter is to describe the physical facilities of the BACWM as a place of everyday experience and interaction. In Scott's epigraph to this chapter, his advice remarks the potentiality of social actors to create and recreate a particular place built by policy-makers without compromise of the pre-existent places (in this case the old wholesale markets). Although policy-makers planned an organised, peaceful and ordered wholesale market, the BACWM is the creation of a very large number of different people with different ideas and purposes (cf. Scott 1998: 142). This means that peddlers, porters (*changarines*), odd jobbers (*peones*), vendors, wholesalers and civil

servants deal with the everyday changing circumstances and attempt to create a space for themselves. They interact and use different strategies that, in some ways, have unexpected effects on a wider process of fresh fruit and vegetable distribution (cf. Long 1984: 3).

By describing the different facilities of the BACWM, such as the administration, laboratory, warehouses and commercial pavilions, this chapter attempts to situate the reader at the scene where social actors create their own domains. By doing so, this chapter strives to answer the following questions: What does the BACWM look like? What kinds of interactions take place at this marketplace? How do social actors produce this social space?

As explained in Chapter 1, the BACWM can be analysed as a social space where everyday practices enable and constrain actors to create their own domains (McGee 2004). The BACWM is a field of action between social life and policy processes, where different groups of actors contest over issues, claims, resources, values, meanings and representation (cf. Arce 2003, Long 2001a). These social relations transform the BACWM and rearrange its position within spatial–temporal configurations. So, multiple sets of social space are created as a result of the different social groups interacting at the BACWM. These social groups, whose everyday practices are guided by numerous formal and informal rules, are the market-makers. These groups construct social identities that are part of the BACWM (cf. Abolafia 1998).

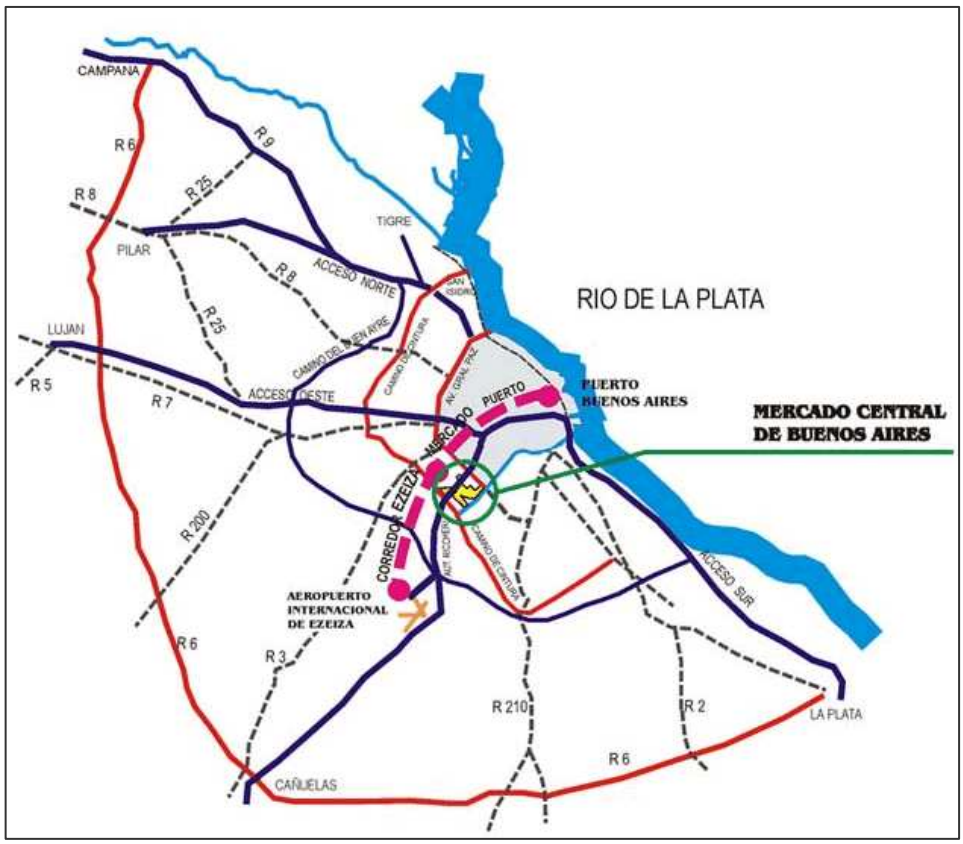
By analysing secondary data, participant observation and interviews, this chapter also attempts to illustrate these spatial–temporal configurations: the first part describes the physical appearance of the BACWM; the second part seeks to address vital political concerns such as the appropriation of different spaces by social groups. These social groups (constituted for instance by civil servants, porters, vendors or wholesalers) are identified as domains with their particular locus of rules, norms and values, which imply a degree of social commitment. This chapter strives to introduce the reader into the fascinating world of fresh fruit and vegetable distribution as more than an economic space.

## The Buenos Aires Wholesale Market (BACWM): Characteristics

The BACWM is the main centre of fresh fruit and vegetable distribution in Argentina. It supplies more than 11 million consumers (33% of the total Argentinean population) and receives about 13,000 trucks a week from different production areas both within and outside the country (http://www.mercadocentral.com.ar). The volume of fresh fruit and vegetable commercialised at this marketplace is 1,500,000 tons a year (Fernández Lozano 2008), significantly more than its model, Rungis, which commercialises 960,000 tons a year (Semmaris 2009) and less than a half of the volume commercialised at the Mexican Central de Abasto (http://www.ficeda.com.mx).

The BACWM is strategically located only 12 km from down-town Buenos Aires (highway access), and near Ezeiza International Airport and Río de La Plata Port (out-of-use railway access). It is situated in a metropolitan area called Gran Buenos Aires (Map 3.1). Its geographical location allows arriving in down-town Buenos Aires, Ezeiza International Airport or Río de La Plata Port by car via the Richieri Highway in 10 minutes (Map 3.2).

***Map 3.1. Geographical location of the Buenos Aires Central Wholesale Market***




*Source: MCBA Corporation*

The BACWM covers an area of 540 hectares, 210 of which are used for fresh fish, fruit and vegetable commercialisation and administration activities. The remainder is reserved for future investments such as storage facilities. Map 3.3 and Picture 3.1 show the complex facilities built in the 1970s.

There are four entrances to the BACWM. The main access is on Richieri Highway in the direction of Ezeiza Airport (Map 3.2 and K-4 in Map 3.3).[31] The 86 bus, which arrives at the BACWM, has its first stop (K-5 in Figure 6) close to the laboratory and police station (K-6 and K-7, respectively). Only people who work at the BACWM Corporation get off the bus here. The second and last stop (D-12 in Figure 6) is at the market pavilions (from B6-B11 to H6-H11), where *changarines* and buyers frequently dismount.

The administration building (picture 3.2) is a five-storey building with two entrances and two car parks. The main entrance leads to the hall where the BACWM Corporation employees must swipe their identification card through a machine (entrance and exit control). A scale model of how the BACWM is supposed to look like is situated to the left of the hall and an information desk to the right. There is also a huge stall where auctions were held initially (1984–1985), which is now used as an auditorium. Several banks, a post office, toilets, a taxi-cab service, telephone and Internet cabins/cafes and small bars are located around this stall.

From the main entrance, there is access by lifts or stairs to the different floors, which are full of offices. This building is inhabited by more than 450 civil servants and people who rent the offices (mainly wholesalers) or work in the banks or bars. The environment gives the impression of the white elephant described in Chapter 2: a large infrastructure and many workers without clear goals.

A private company, which charges services such as light and gas to stall-holders, uses several offices on the first floor. On the same floor, the Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Wholesalers Chamber rent two offices. Another office is used by four technicians working on a special programme of quality.[32] The first floor also has a large canteen where civil servants working at the BACWM Corporation enter by way of a pass, which gives them the right to have lunch between 12.30 and 2PM from Monday to Friday. This practice is reminiscent of the role of the Argentinean state of the 1950s and 1960s, where work and life conditions were assured by the state (Coraggio 2007).

On the second floor, we can find the administrative offices of some of the wholesalers and the National Employees Union (UPCN). Besides these offices, a private restaurant offers meals in a more comfortable environment than the canteen on the first floor.

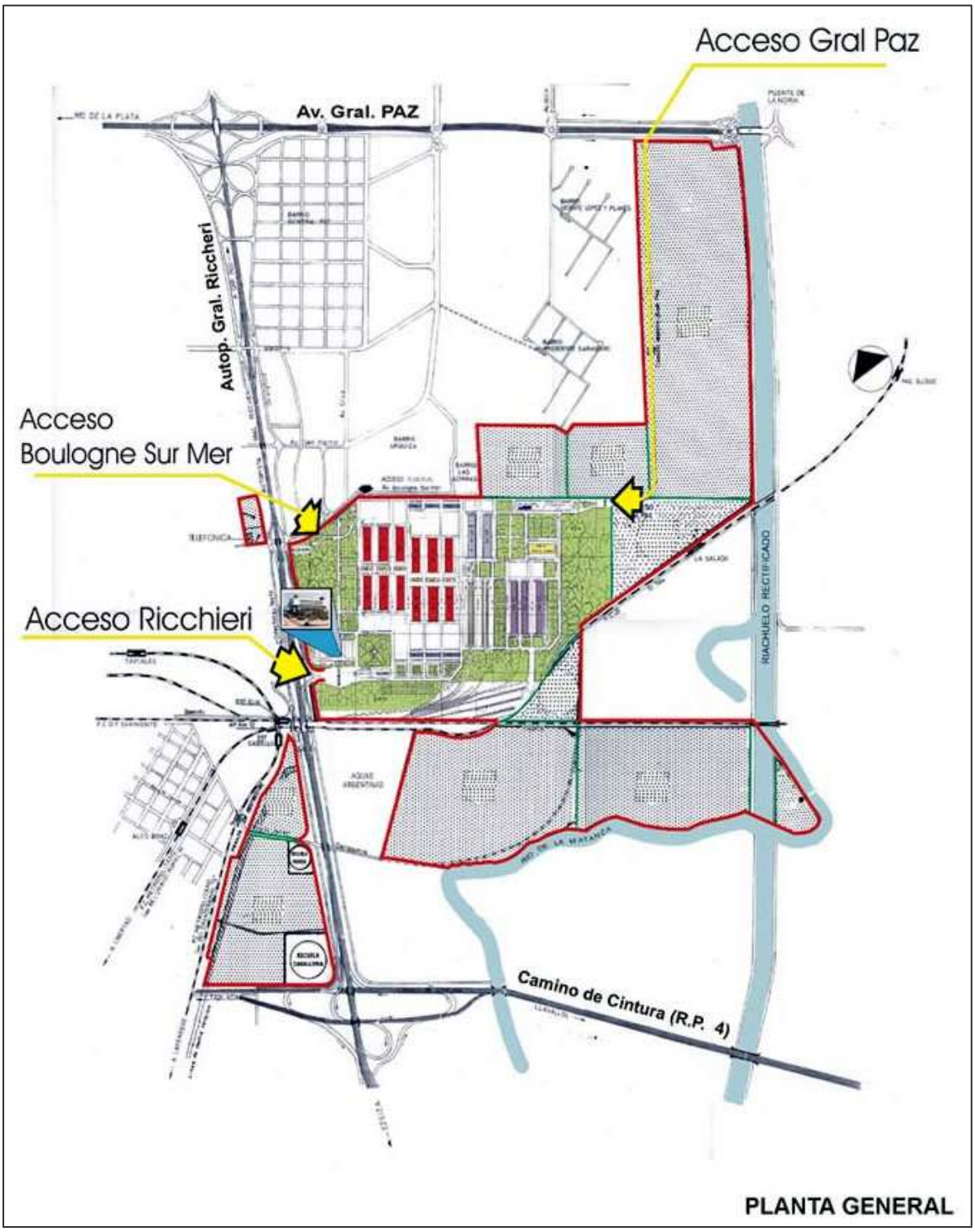
---

[31] The second main access is on General Paz Avenue (Map 3.2 and 21-b in Map 3.3). The remaining entrances do not have any control. Controls require truckers to present a fresh fruit and vegetable way-bill. This fresh produce way-bill is a document describing the merchandise's origin (grower's company name and place), destination (wholesalers' names), and trucker and truck data. Sometimes trucks are weighed by an electronic weighing scale. Theoretically, these data are useful for statistical and quality control purposes.

[32] This programme was born in 2005. It is an agreement between the BACWM's Corporation and the National Institute of Agricultural Technology (INTA). Four technicians are in charge of investigating, developing and disseminating post-harvest technologies and information to the actors involved in the fresh fruit and vegetable chain (http://www.inta.gov.ar).

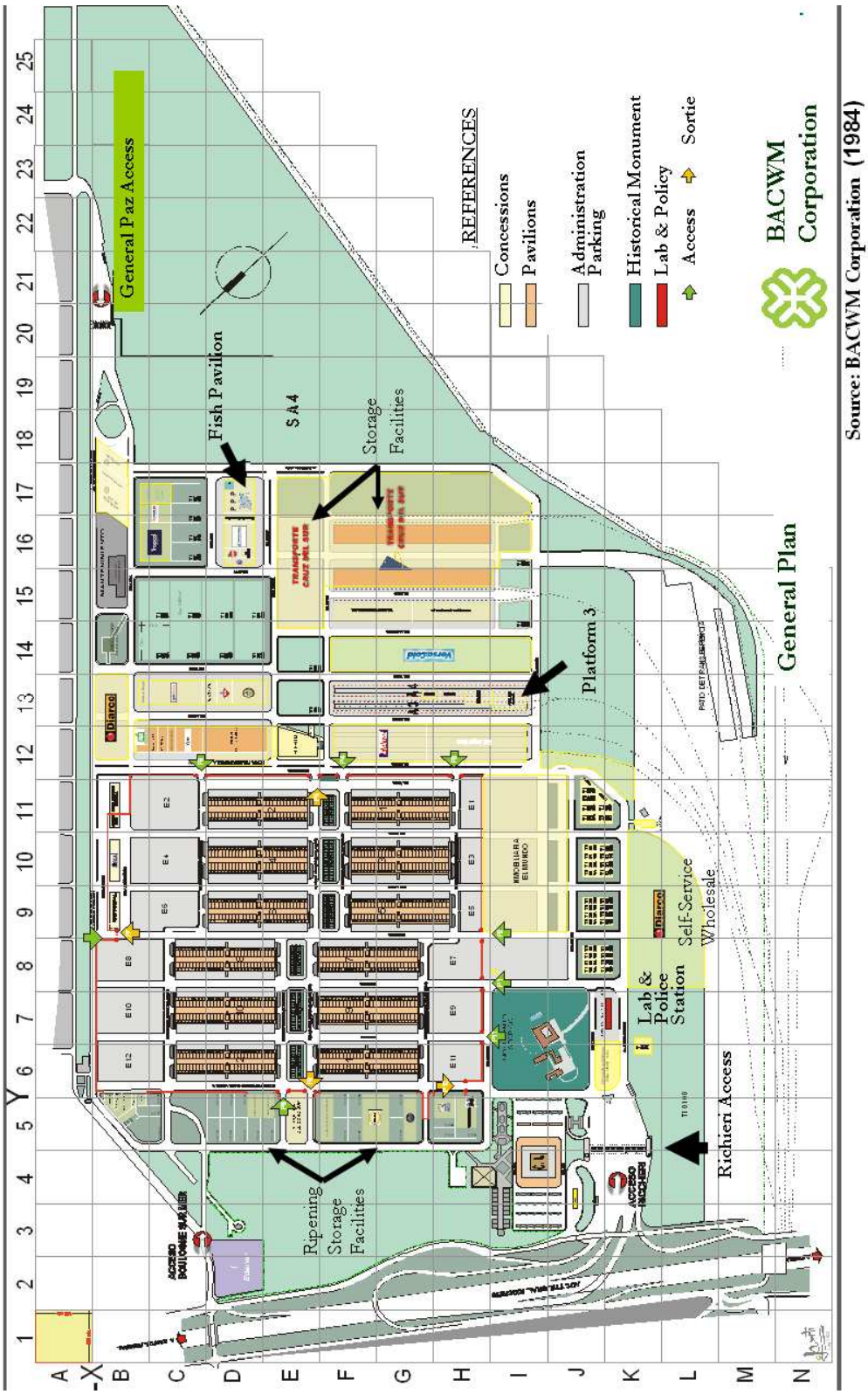
Several of the offices on the third floor are rented by companies working either directly or indirectly at the BACWM: wholesalers, information consultants, and other service companies. Some of the offices on the fourth floor are used by the market's statistical department, the institutional department in charge of receiving everybody who is interested in doing business at the BACWM, and by the library, which offers school books to employees' children and a few historical documents about the BACWM's building project.

**Map 3.2. Different accesses to the BACWM**




Source: MCBA Corporation

**Map 3.3. The Buenos Aires Central Wholesale Market: General Plan**



### *Picture 3.1. The Buenos Aires Central Wholesale Market from above*

*Source: Google map*

### *Picture 3.2 Administration building*

*Source: MLV*

The Corporation Authorities (political representation of the municipal, provincial and national state) have their offices on the fifth floor, and share the floor with the press, the information technology group, and the property-rights department for renting places at this marketplace.

The press disseminates information about the activities of the BACWM and distributes releases about fresh fruit and vegetables and wholesale markets to the BACWM's employees. The information technology group provides an Internet service and updates the BACWM's web page. People who want to rent or renew rental facilities, such as stalls, warehouses, restaurants, bars and offices, have to contact the admission office personnel, who authorise the rental of facilities according to legal requirements (http://www.mercadocentral.com.ar).

The five-storey building has also a basement, where different provincial and national banks used to function when the BACWM operated with a centralised payment system (for more details, see Chapter 2). The basement is currently used by an insurance company and some offices are occupied by the Truckers Union (*Union Tranviarios Automotor*).

Outside the administration building, you can visit the historical house dating from 1942. This old house used to be the house of a 7,000 hectare farm and is surrounded nowadays only by a small green area (see Map 3.3 from I6-I7 to J6-J7). This part of the market is really quiet. The house is used exceptionally to welcome international or national delegations visiting the BACWM. Close to this historical area, you can find the quality control laboratory, a police station, and a petrol station (K7 in Map 3.3).

The quality control laboratory holds 27 employees. This two-storey building is divided into different labs of fresh fruit and vegetables, fish and microbiological analysis. Following the control criteria of the National Agrifood Health and Quality Services (*Servicio Nacional de Sanidad y Calidad Agroalimentaria: SENASA*), chemists and biochemists at the BACWM examine pesticide remains, the degree of ripeness in some fruits, artificial colouring in citrus fruit, and microbiological contamination in leaf vegetables. These analyses are performed daily in five fresh fruit and vegetable samples. The main goal of the BACWM laboratory is to guarantee consumers an acceptable quality and hygiene in fresh fruit and vegetables as well as to improve the agricultural practices of growers.

To the north-west of the laboratory and the historical house, you can see a line of buildings used for storage, various packaging companies, agrochemical and seed stores, banana ripening and cold storage facilities (concessions), and a diesel oil station. To the right of these buildings, there are one of the parking lots (indicated with E in Map 3.3) and the pavilions. The fresh fruit and vegetable transactional pavilions (from B5-H5 to B11-H11 in Map 3.3), which contain twelve 10,000 $m^2$ large roofed pavilions (Pictures 3.1 and 3.3) and six 3,000 $m^2$ half-roofed pavilions called *playas libres* (Pictures 3.1 and 3.4).

***Picture 3.3. A Pavilion at the BACWM***


*Source: MLV*

The pavilions do not have the same dimensions and their distribution is irregular (see Picture 3.1 and Map 3.3). In this area, social actors interact with each other as well as with fresh fruit and vegetables, trucks, boxes, and other market devices (Callon et al. 2007). Stalls are rented by 510 wholesalers who have an average of two stalls each. Although the *playas libres* were

originally designated only for growers selling their own fresh produce, nowadays both growers and wholesalers rent stalls there. The large pavilions and the *playas libres* consist of 54 and 42 stalls respectively. The large pavilions offer more facilities, such as cold chambers with an average capacity of 2,500 $m^3$ in each pavilion and a good platform for easy unloading at the back of the stalls. Changing and shower facilities are provided at the basement of every pavilion to workers in charge of unloading.

Although every pavilion seems to have the same opportunities to receive buyers, according to the people interviewed this is not the case. Some employees, wholesalers and buyers (Interviews 2, 11-48, 37a) consider that there have been differences since one of the chairmen of the BACWM Corporation decided to fence the perimeter of the market pavilions in 2004. For them, the fence makes buyers (greengrocers, other wholesalers, etc.) visit only pavilions close to the main entrance. However, others (Interviews 4, 11-48) remark that the differences between pavilions are linked to the presence of large and prestigeous companies that attract most of the buyers. In other words, each pavilion comprises a wholesale market place in itself (interview 4). This suggests that the BACWM is a network of related markets, which cross-cut different boundaries according to the sellers´ activities (Callon 1998a: 43).

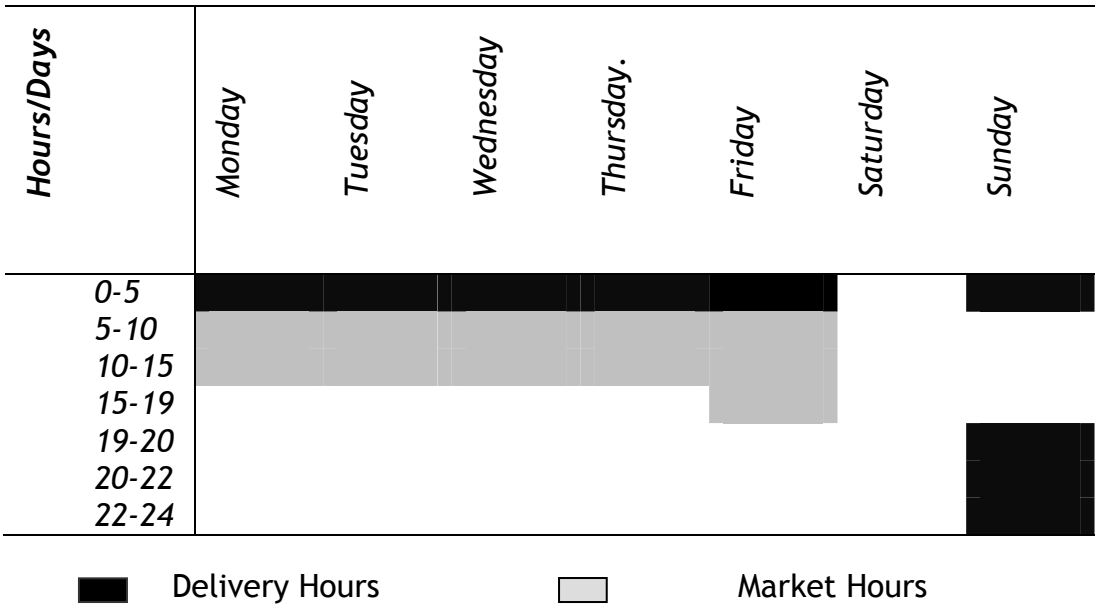
The pavilion area is the most vibrant part of the marketplace because of the numerous groups of people working within and around the area. In addition, the BACWM is much more than a fruit and vegetable market. It also encloses a building called El Reloj, which offers an assortment of products, from clothes and food to hardware tools and a *comedor* (soup kitchen), consisting of a kitchen and dining room where poor people are offered a free lunch from Monday to Friday. Next to this construction, a rudimentary daily fresh fruit and vegetable open market offers lower quality produce through its 30 stalls. There is also a self-service wholesale company (L-9 in Figure 6), supplying cleaning products, foodstuff, beverages and outlet-priced electro-domestic appliances to grocers' shops, department stores, supermarkets, candy-shops, and gastronomy businesses, among many others.

To the left of the market pavilions, you can find a waste compaction plant (B-14 in Map 3.3), a maintenance building (B-15), a fish pavilion with only two operating companies (D-17), and an out-of-use railway (F-J 13, where the Programme to alleviate poverty was carried on: see Annex 1). Close to the railway, there are cold storage facilities rented by large service companies involved in transport, distribution and logistics. In addition, the BACWM offers other activities, such as an 'illegal trade market for clothes and accessories'. This outdoor market operates every Wednesday, Saturday and Sunday. Although the BACWM Public Corporation rents this physical place, it is not responsible for controlling this spontaneous market created by sellers under the legal shadow of the BACWM. This market has 1,000 small and poor stalls operated by 3,000 employees (Martínez Iturbe 2000, interview 37e).

Thus far, this chapter has described the facilities of the BACWM, but this marketplace goes beyond its infrastructure since it is organised through the

practices of its social actors. An interesting example illustrating this point is the market hours. Delivery and market hours at the BACWM vary according to the day of the week (Table 3.1). Truckers can deliver their products with the help of porters (*changarines*), who are organised through cooperatives. Since truckers come from different and far-away distances, sometimes they unload fresh fruit and vegetables during trading hours.

***Table 3.1 Delivery and Trading Opening and Closing Hours at the BACWM***




Sales start at 5 AM every day, except on Saturdays and Sundays, when the BACWM is closed for trading. Although the official closing time is at 3 o'clock in the afternoon, some wholesalers continue selling for another one or two hours. The busiest day is Friday, when trading is unofficially extended until after 7 PM. However, opening and closing hours show how social actors reconstruct their own rules, going beyond official hours. As expected, these extended opening hours generate a source of different and contradictory opinions among wholesalers and civil servants. Some wholesalers would like to work nights, whereas others (mainly the younger ones) consider that modern technologies facilitate good preserving and fast transportation and thus avoid the need to work nights. Consequently, each wholesaler has his/her own idea about the best BACWM opening hours. As regards this issue, one of the wholesalers interviewed said:

> 'The BACWM has opening hours against the greengrocers' businesses. We have to take care of these small customers if we want to survive the supermarket boom. We have to allow no more than 2 or 4 hours for customers to come and buy. Nowadays, customers have long hours to buy, which is not good for the price

> formation. So, we have to change this vicious circle into a virtuous one' (Field note 62 B, 5 May 2008).

Disagreements about the market's operation hours are endless. Nevertheless, beyond vendors' and wholesalers' discourses, they start selling before the official opening hours. These everyday practices show how social actors create their own spaces and times of commercialisation. By looking at the social actors' everyday practices, the following section will attempt to describe part of the activities that are carried out in this space called the BACWM.

## Following Social Groups at the BACWM

These heterogeneous groups need each other to develop their own careers and businesses. In addition, they are connected with other social groups linked to growers, other wholesale markets, greengrocers and politicians. Thus, this market place is not constructed solely by buyers and sellers, but also by other social actors. Social actors interact not only through fresh fruit and vegetables, but also through kinship, friendship and for political reasons. This assemblage of subjects and objects is co-ordinated by formal and informal rules, as well as by social, cultural and economic factors (cf. Abolafia 1998, De Landa 2006).

BACWM's users construct rich social identities linked with their particular activities. According to Abolafia (1998), who studies stock and future markets on Wall Street, market-makers use their identity as a tool both to reduce uncertainty and risk in their environment and to maximise survival. On Wall Street, the market-makers are entrepreneurs. Although Abolafia refers only to the behaviour of buyers and sellers, we can extend the concept to each person who works daily at the BACWM, such as civil servants, vendors, porters and employees.

This part of the chapter will analyse some of these market-makers in their daily practices. According to reports (Del Piero 2003) and one of the employees interviewed (37e), approximately 6,500 people work in the pavilion area every day. There are 3,000 people working as cashiers, vendors, odd-jobbers or wholesalers and about 3,500 *changarines* (porters) either associated or not with a Workers Union. The pavilion area changes its aspect according to the days of the week and hours of the day. Very early in the morning, around 5 AM., the *playas libres* have their own environment. This area is the busiest and the liveliest place of the BACWM, since wholesalers sell small amounts of fresh produce to a huge number of small retailers; the circulation of people, trolleys and fresh fruit and vegetables is considerably more significant than that in the pavilions. During the hours when the social actors at this area are working intensively, there is nobody at the administration building, since laboratory employees start work at AM. So, compared to the pavilion area, the administration and laboratory buildings

are very quiet, even at lunch-time when the employees share lunch at the canteen.

The environment around the pavilions is very lively, noisy, vibrant and colourful, particularly at lunch-time. You can smell barbecue blended with marihuana, and have the feeling of being at a festival of noises, movements, shouts and happiness. Bolivian retailers and informal sellers around pavilions are distinguished by colourful clothes combined with the natural colours of fresh fruit and vegetables (Picture 3.5). Everybody wants to exchange fresh produce, information, work, and money.

During summer-time, it is easy to distinguish between the pavilions (Picture 3.3) and the *playas libres* (Picture 3.4). The high roof of the pavilions allows preserving cooler temperatures than the *playas libres*. Whereas the pavilions are well-built facilities, the small half-roofed pavilions do not have brick walls and their roofs are not good enough to protect people from bad weather. Thus, important firms are frequently located at the large pavilions rather than at the *playas libres*, and have more than two stalls in different pavilions.

***Picture 3.4. A Playa Libre at the BACWM***


*Source: MLV*

When buying hours finish at around 4 PM., the calm settles at the market pavilions. At that moment, it is possible to see poor people trying to take fresh fruit and vegetables from the rubbish lying on the floor or a group of *changarines* drinking beer and talking (Picture 3.6).

Although it does not seem to be a dangerous place, some BACWM Corporation employees advised people that they should not go there after 4 PM. since it is common knowledge that robberies take place, particularly armed robberies against wholesalers who pay their suppliers in cash.

By observing these social actors 'in action' at the time and at the place where they construct and reconstruct the BACWM, the following section will illustrate the connections between these market-makers. The social actors selected are civil servants, vendors, odd jobbers (*peones*) and porters (*changarines*). Since most of them interact with wholesalers, wholesalers deserve another chapter.

***Picture 3.5 Pavilions area at the BACWM***

Source: MLV

### *Picture 3.6. BACWM's peones and changarines at closing hours*


*Source: MLV*

### *Picture 3.7. A civil servant at the stall*


*Source: MLV*

***Picture 3.8. A vendor with a buyer at the stall***

*Source: MLV*

***Picture 3.9. A peón at the stall***

*Source: MLV*

## A Civil Servant at the BACWM Corporation

A civil servant is a person who works for a government department. In the case of the BACWM Corporation, civil servants follow the chairmen's decisions. This means that they can be transferred between departments without formality and without having their employment rights respected. This shows certain dynamism and flexibility within the organization of this group, although it is a source of conflicts between them because civil servants are exposed to change from high to low work positions at any time. Civil servants are in charge of a variety of tasks such as renting stalls and other facilities, disseminating information about the activities of the BACWM, surveying prices, computing, and assuring quality control (Picture 3.7). Although this is a heterogeneous group of people, they are related to each other by their tasks as civil servants. These activities join them in a particular place at the BACWM: the five-storage building and particularly the dining room on the second floor, where they meet at lunch-time every day. This lunch is a perk offered by the Corporation as part of its employees' salaries. During lunch-time, civil servants exchange gossip and information about the organisation of the marketplace or about national political issues.

By tracking a particular civil servant, this section attempts to understand the blurred boundaries of this social group and its horizontal interactions with other social actors at the BACWM (see Chapter 5). The civil servant selected is a 40 year old agronomist called Mr. O. Mr. O is married and has three children, and lives in a nice neighbourhood in Buenos Aires city. He has been working as an inspector at the BACWM laboratory since 1991. He loves the BACWM for various reasons. The BACWM is a state and public institution that has allowed him to pursue his own professional career and to support his family. His parents have always worked for national state institutions, and Mr. O is proud of helping the state with his job, although he is also somewhat disappointed:

> 'The BACWM is a source of knowledge. I learn something every day. We [referring to his 12 colleagues in the inspection area] have expertise in fresh fruit and vegetable post-harvest conditions. Thus, other institutions consult us when they have problems. Nevertheless, there is no chance of obtaining a good technical position through interviews or competitive examinations. The BACWM authorities [chairmen] reward people who have the political capacity to climb the power ladder rather than people who want to professionally improve the BACWM' (Interview 37 d, 6 March 2007).

Despite Mr. O's passion for the BACWM, he does not like the way the BACWM is organised. He started working there due to his political contacts six months before finishing his studies at university. Mr. O shows that the relationships between chairmen and civil servants are full of contrasts and ambiguities, pointing out his difficulties to improve his own technical career as a professional within this marketplace. According to Mr. O, some BACWM employees offer favours to chairmen in order to be promoted. These struggles

generate power relations that promote different status among employees. Mr. O's everyday work life can illustrate these complex and conflictive relationships between civil servants and chairmen at the BACWM.

Mr. O's daily work involves auditing quality at the wholesalers' stalls very early in the morning. His working day starts at 6 AM. He, together with the other 12 inspectors, decide which sanitary risk to check and divide their tasks for the day. They go in pairs to different pavilions. They finish their tasks at around noon, have lunch at the BACWM canteen, and leave the BACWM at about 2 PM.

The inspectors are in charge of quality and sanitary controls, and of throwing away or sending products that wholesalers consider unsuitable for selling to platform 3 (see Annex 1). Early in the morning, the inspectors visit some of the 12 pavilions and the six *playas libres*. Although the inspectors do not wear a uniform, wholesalers and their employees know them very well. They pass by stalls looking for the products that may pose a sanitary or quality risk. Inspectors use risk calendars, which warn them about the different quality or sanitary risks coming from different geographical areas where fresh fruit and vegetables are cultivated. These risk calendars are associated with events such as the high probability of whitefly's damage to red pepper cultivated in the North during October and November, or the unsatisfactory level of ripeness in early-season citrus fruit, or the presence of pesticides in early-season apples. As inspectors, they focus on these products to extract samples. The criteria for the number of samples have changed throughout the years. Nowadays the inspectors extract four or five samples per day (interview 14b).

Each inspector, according to his professional criteria (looking at the organoleptic characteristics appearance, smell, and flavour), decides to take samples from particular products in different stalls. Inspectors also use their own experience since they have been watching different kinds of quality and sanitary problems for more than 10 years. This makes them 'experts' at controlling quality and sanitary levels in fresh fruit and vegetables.

If one of the inspectors finds a problem, he asks the wholesaler for the product's way-bill in order to know its origin (name of the grower, place of cultivation, variety and quality standard). Then they extract samples from different boxes. The sample represents 10% of the total. One of Mr. O's colleagues explains that growers have developed better quality practices in the last years than before:

> 'Producers and wholesalers used to put the best quality produce in the visible part of the boxes and hide the small, colourless, or faulty produce at the bottom. But nowadays they, especially fruit growers who are engaged with export, know much more about quality. So, most of them stopped those practices.' (Interview 14b, 9 November 2006).

Although wholesalers have improved the quality of their supplies, the inspection task is not always acknowledged as a sign of progress at the BACWM. While most of the wholesalers claim to be the only ones who are

inspected (Interview 6-22/24, 2006), other wholesalers interviewed pointed out that they are at the BACWM because of the quality control of fresh produce (Interviews 12-53, 11-22, 2006). Mr. O considers that confiscating merchandise from wholesalers is not an easy job. According to him, some of the wholesalers resist controls, since they do not want to stop selling. That is why Mr. O can come across rude reactions from wholesalers or vendors at the moment of sampling. For instance, one day he found unripe avocados in one stall at pavilion 12, and because he decided to take samples, the wholesaler started shouting:

> 'You are always bothering us. Why do you always come here? Go to XX [an important wholesaler] or go to control other wholesale markets where Bolivians work without any papers, without any kind of hygiene. Then growers will go to the other wholesale markets where nobody inspects them' (Field note 75, 6 March 2007).

As a sanitary inspector, Mr. O knew he could do nothing in front of the disappointed wholesaler. He knew that it was better not to argue, since the wholesaler later apologised for being so rude. Although Mr. O did not punish the wholesaler with any penalty such as a fine, he knew that he had only interrupted the wholesaler's selling of this particular product for some hours until the laboratory results came through. This action upsets wholesalers and makes inspectors feel uncomfortable. In addition, wholesalers almost never tell growers about any quality problem with their products since some wholesalers are afraid of losing them as suppliers. As a result, Mr. O has doubts about his role as an inspector at the BACWM.

The incident of unripe avocados goes beyond the face-to-face encounter between Mr. O and this wholesaler. As will be mentioned in Chapter 7, an association of growers of avocados asked the Argentinean National Secretary of Agriculture, Livestock, Fisheries and Food (SAGPyA) to change the official quality protocol of avocados in the 2000s. That change was seen by wholesalers and civil servants as unfair for small growers who could not achieve those new requirements. Beyond the different quality criteria, the case of avocados shows that quality control is embedded into a wide context linked with other spatial–temporal configurations.

Mr. O and his colleagues have to face this and other political decisions and try not to lose credibility among wholesalers. Changes at the political level impact the everyday life of civil servants in different ways. During my fieldwork (2006–2007), the authorities at the BACWM were seeking to educate rather than sanction growers through wholesalers. This meant they did not want only to inspect and stop sales. They attempted to go beyond commercialisation by working together with the National Agrifood Health and Quality Service (SENASA) to improve agricultural practices at the horticultural sector (interview 14). According to Mr. O, this was not a good sign:

> One loves the BACWM so much that it is not nice to accept changes that you know are going to deteriorate its functions. The authorities have changed the philosophy of control since they argue

> that there are other wholesale markets without control in the metropolitan area. This means that we cannot confiscate merchandise; we can only recommend wholesalers not to sell them. In the past, we drew up infraction acts and now we only notify wholesalers about the sanitary problem. But if I start forgiving them, I won't be able to impose sanctions anymore. At the administrative desk it is easy to change norms, but on the floor with wholesalers the reality is very different. Chairmen do not know anything about wholesaling. As soon as they start to learn, they will leave their functions' (Interview 37 a, 5 December 2006).

In Mr. O's opinion, strict control is the only way to manage the quality and sanitary aspect of fresh fruit and vegetable distribution. Consequently, he does not agree with the chairmen's decision of education rather than imposing sanctions. However, Mr. O's point of view contrasts with other opinions. According to an ex-employee, the new way of inspecting is much friendlier and the new policy does not confront wholesalers (Interview 66). He thinks that every employee at the BACWM's laboratory, except for a few exceptions, believes in fining wholesalers since, from their point of view, they learn through punishments. These different points of view are also related to political positions.

Although the person responsible for the quality laboratory considers that the BACWM has a competitive advantage for being the only wholesale market offering quality control (Interview 14), she has started to diminish control. This decision generated conflict between civil servants who are in favour of the authorities' criteria and others who are against these criteria. According to the latter, if an employee does not agree with the new inspection criteria, he/she will be punished by reducing his/her occupational status. An example of this is the story told by one of Mr. O's colleagues (Field note 74). Years ago, he was accused of harassing colleagues because he refused to reduce the number of inspection samples from 10 to 1 potato bags. Consequently, nowadays he feels he is doing irrelevant tasks without using his professional knowledge.

Another source of conflict is the usefulness of checking quality beyond the market garden gate. According to business consultants, quality control at the end of the fresh fruit and vegetable distribution chain is not useful, since control has to be carried out during the production process to avoid future sanitary damages (Interviews 11 and 33). Even more, some interviewees (Interviews 31, 33) consider that the control developed at the BACWM is not efficient. Few samples per day seem not to be enough to achieve effective control. Nevertheless, others (Interviews 14, 29) consider that at least the quality control sector can offer some advice to growers through wholesalers in order to improve the sanitary and visual quality of fresh produce introduced at the BACWM every day. However, as mentioned above, it would seem that wholesalers seldom communicate quality and sanitary problems to their suppliers.

To sum up, Mr. O's experience shows how a civil servant strives to construct his/her own identity and space. Although he identifies himself as a civil servant, he points to his differences with other colleagues. It seems that the social boundaries of this group are not always well defined. This is a common characteristic within other market-makers, such as vendors.

### A Vendor

To the economist, a vendor is a person who promotes or exchanges goods or services for money. However, a vendor also exchanges non-material or intangible goods such as symbols and values involved in any commercial transaction. At the BACWM, there are multiple kinds of vendors. This multiplicity is expressed by pedlars who sell food, clothes, medicines, DVDs and even sex. Pedlars' activities are based on the demand of workers at the BACWM, whereas fresh fruit and vegetable vendors supply to outsiders. This part of the chapter will focus on the last kind of vendors (Picture 3.8). This group is very heterogeneous. They can be stall holders or wholesalers' employees. Vendors are in charge of selling fresh fruit and vegetables, and must balance competitive prices and the quality level of their supplies. Consequently, being a vendor is a difficult task not meant for everybody. By tracking one of these vendors at the BACWM, this section attempts to illustrate how this group of market-makers learn the business of selling fresh fruit and vegetables, and also how they construct their own image as honest and skilful vendors.

Vendors are frequently employed by large companies that sell over $ 5 million a year (more or less € 1.3 million in 2006) at their stalls. Large wholesalers prefer to delegate the selling task to their employees; whereas small or medium-sized wholesalers share the activity with employees in order to reduce labour costs (see Chapter 4). The case selected is a vendor called Carlitos who works for a large company, with four stalls at pavilion 12. Carlitos is 56 years old, married, and passionate about wholesaling. His love for wholesale markets has its roots in the Abasto neighbourhood (down-town Buenos Aires) where he was born. He explains how he started working when he was 14 years old:

> 'I used to live next to the home of Gardel [famous tango musician] and close to the Abasto Wholesale Market [see Chapter 2]. I was attending secondary school, but during my summer holidays I wanted to have my own money to go to the swimming pool. So, some friends and I started selling fruit on the streets. We used to go to the Abasto Wholesale Market for supplies. People loved fruit in those days.'
>
> 'Then, I got a qualification as a mechanical technician and I began a university career. It was when Campora took to power and they were going to bring Perón back. I studied for two months, but I couldn't continue because of the teachers' strikes and so on

> [referring to politically conflictive times]. Six months later, the military coup seized control of the Abasto Wholesale Market. Wholesalers were obliged to do triple invoicing. But all of them were 'tanos brutos' [referring to Italians without formal knowledge]; they used to put the money in their aprons and didn't include their sales in the books. In order to obey the new regulations, wholesalers needed help. So I started to work for a wholesaler who didn't know how to read or write' (Field note 73, 10 March 2008).

Carlitos' personal experience shows how he was always embedded in the world of fresh fruit and vegetables. His first informal and then formal activities allowed him to learn a lot about fresh fruit and vegetable quality, varieties and production areas. Soon, he improved his knowledge and learnt how to increase profits. Hence, he opened his own stall in the 1970s. When the urban wholesale markets closed, he had to move to the new BACWM (see Chapter 2). Since he was a small wholesaler, he lacked referrals from suppliers that would enable him to ask for a BACWM stall. At that time, one had to fulfil certain requirements in order to be admitted as a wholesaler. For instance, wholesalers had to move more than 400 parcels a day in order to be able to rent a stall at the BACWM. Carlitos, disabled at beginning his own business, decided to offer his knowledge to other wholesalers. He started working for another enterprise, and in 1985 he switched to the company where he is currently working. According to Carlitos, they employed him because one of the owners knew him from the old Abasto Wholesale Market (cf. Granovetter 1983).

In order to understand vendors' everyday practices, I followed Carlitos around the BACWM on a summer's day during my 2007 field-work. On Sundays, Carlitos starts his working day at 9.30 PM when the trucks arrive at the BACWM, because he is responsible for receiving and controlling merchandise coming from different production areas of Argentina and even from abroad. He is not alone; a *peón* (odd-jobber) helps him distribute the pallets into the cold chambers or into the stall. The stall is huge and has a room upstairs for administrative tasks. When Carlitos finishes sorting out the pallets at around 0.30 AM he goes upstairs to arrange bills and to type product and price lists suggested by producers into the computer. Thus, Carlitos does not sleep on Sundays. His workmates come in at 5 AM. *Peones* (odd-jobbers) start to take the pallets out of the cold chambers to the stall's exhibition, and open some of the boxes to display the fresh produce to the buyers. As a result, the stall shows a good assortment of different kinds of fresh fruit and vegetables. The stall offers more than 40 different kinds of fruits. This shows the capacity of this company to supply their customers with a large variety of products in relation to the average companies working at the BACWM.

The vendor's difficult task is to decide how much the merchandise he has in the stall will cost during market hours. Each vendor has his own strategy based on their own experience, and they always strive not to make a mistake

selling at a price lower than the average. A wholesaler who sells products in his own stalls explained to me how he decides on prices:

> 'Early in the morning, before opening, I visit the stalls that sell large amounts of the products that I have. If I see a lot of, for instance, tomatoes, I know that the price will be low. But if I don't see too many, I quickly divide the kilos I have in each box and I more or less figure out the price the greengrocers can sell per kilo at their shops. I always try to think of a reasonable price, but there are some crazy vendors who put up a very high price. This doesn't make sense because if the greengrocers can't sell the fresh produce, tomorrow we will have a lot of tomatoes at the BACWM and the price will go down' (Interview 4, 10 April 2007).

This vendor also explained the differences at the price formation process. Products easily replaced, particular in summer when supply is high and diverse, buyers and sellers play more with other elements such as colours, appearances, and taste. Products such as tomatoes or potatoes cannot be easily replaced. So, their prices are strictly linked to the volume of supply. The wholesaler interviewed knows this 'classical' economic axiom from his everyday experiences rather than from formal academic knowledge. This shows that social actors do not behave or decide as atoms outside a social context (Granovetter 1985). Vendors perceive how the price is evolving in the marketplace from buyers' behaviour. From experience, they know that if a buyer fights for a discount, it means that he/she knows that there are products of similar quality available for less money in other stalls. In addition, vendors can lose clients if they offer fresh produce at a price higher than the average.

Although vendors play the game in which one acts as if everybody is equal (cf. Goffman 1963), treating all buyers with equal courtesy, still they differentiate. Loyal and large buyers always receive the best quality and price. In addition, when there is small supply of a particular product they reserve some boxes or bags for them (see also Chapters 4 and 7). However, they also want to win new customers and thus give some discounts to the 'new' ones when they have enough products (Field note 55). In the general equilibrium theory of economics, the concept of price formation is different. The theory implies that in a large group of traders the market becomes more competitive and prices more stable. Nevertheless, traders at the BACWM show that information flow is reduced since there are huge pavilions that do not communicate very well (different prices for a group of pavilions). In addition, many prices are affected because transactions are developed between traders of long-standing acquaintance in a particular dynamic network of communication (Garcia-Parpet 2007, Granovetter 1990c). This confirms that economic actions are constructed through social interactions (Ekeh 1974).

Although wholesalers are directly involved in supply, some vendors help their bosses to contact growers and to receive their fresh produce at the stall. One of the vendors expresses discontent about fruit growers:

> 'There are different kinds of suppliers. Some of them want a specific price and never want to reduce it. I tell them what the reality is; I tell them about the price that we handle here at the BACWM. But if they find better prices at other wholesale markets out of the metropolitan area (national or international markets), they refuse to send us the pallets that we need. They should reconsider this. Last October, growers preferred to export pears rather than to sell them to us. They wanted U$S 40 per box. Now, they are offering a box for U$S 6. Don't they know that we are in the middle of the summer and we have a lot of other fruits to sell? People have only one stomach, we can't sell more fruit. Growers don't understand anything about commercialisation' (Field note 55b, 23 January 2007).

Suppliers or growers constitute another social group that is always in contact with vendors or wholesalers. Although both growers and vendors depend on each other to make a profit from their activities, the relationships between them involve some conflicts and disagreements. This vendor's comment about the growers' behaviour shows an attitude of superiority against growers. Nevertheless, vendors are self-critical and admit that some of them are arrogant to growers and buyers, even more so if the latter are Bolivian (Interview 4). Vendors show feelings of superiority since they consider that growers and buyers have to rely on vendors' knowledge of selling if they want to make a profit. Vendors have to deal with growers' and greengrocers' interests. At the same time they have to make profits for their bosses. How these vendors acquire the ability to do so is part of their origins.

Like the case-study selected, most of the vendors used to have their own stall, storage facilities or distributing enterprise. However, they were not able to continue at such business. Their business failures are linked to a variety of factors, such as low economies of scale or distrustful relationships between buyers and partners. In the past, as shown in Chapter 2, wholesalers used to sell on credit in spite of high inflation rates. Still, they were able to meet their payables. But the circle could be broken when some of their customers stopped paying them large amounts of money. This kind of experience remains strongly in the memory of these people, especially when bankruptcy was involved.

Another factor linked to vendors' business failures is their partners. According to the vendors interviewed, some of their partners were corrupt. They frequently gambled on horses and card games. Others spent money on prostitutes. In addition, some partners were not reliable, since their personal interest prevailed over the goals of their enterprise. Sometimes the result was that the company went bankrupt (Interview 47b; Field note 73). These memories and experiences consolidate vendors as a group of social actors closely linked to wholesaling since they used to be wholesalers themselves.

Vendors' bad business memories and experiences emphasise their admiration and even envy of other social actors who achieved large profits out of sales, such as their bosses, the wholesalers. This creates a different status between

vendors and wholesalers, and thus constructs a particular relationship full of contradictions and ambiguous feelings. Carlitos, for instance, considered his boss as an executive. Although he had first linked the word 'executive' to a person who earns a good salary by doing nothing, he then understood that his boss had taken very clever decisions that had improved the company's performance (Field note 73). Other vendors pointed out that they were able to work but not to make a profit from selling the way their boss did (Interview 47).

Although wholesalers say that they trust their vendors, they always keep an eye on vendors' tasks. Some wholesalers usually complain about vendors' behaviour. One Friday morning, during my field-work (2006–2008), a wholesaler was reprimanding his vendor because he had not been able to unload a truck on time early in the morning, before the boss arrived at the stall. This confrontation between wholesalers and vendors is part of this kind of relationship based on feelings of trust and distrust. Wholesalers gain power status since they think that they always solve problems faster than their employees. Nevertheless, vendors achieve a certain autonomy to resolve problems since wholesalers are not at the stall all day long. Thus, most of the large wholesalers pass some of the responsible tasks to a relative or a right-hand employee. Being at the stall, vendors can also see how every employee works, and they point out the differences with other employees, such as *peones* and *changarines*. One of the vendors interviewed expressed the following:

> 'We [vendors] are the safest thing he [referring to his boss] has. We fight for our boss's profit and the image of this stall. We do not take any extra money. I'm not responsible for the other employees of this stall. I can vouch for our idiosyncrasy as vendors. I've just fought with a peón because peones can even kill someone for nothing. They have to work for the boss, not use the stall for personal business' (Interview 47b, 9 February 2007).

This outburst of feeling and emotion constitutes the expression of vendors' identity. They see themselves as the wholesaler's right-hand men. This vendor pointed out his feelings of being part of a particular social group within the stall: the 'trusted' vendors. By stressing on the 'trusted-vendor status', he tries to take control of the space of trust among other employees at the stall and even at the BACWM. For instance, vendors do not justify a *peón*'s receiving extra money from buyers/retailers. This shows a type of vendors' animosity against *peones* or *changarines*. In spite of this rivalry, they work together from 5 AM to 3 or 7 PM every day. These interactions create a particular environment in each stall, showing different ways of relations linked with camaraderie but also with conflicts that go beyond the stalls. In this sense, the social relations between *changarines* and *peones* are probably the main instances when the marketplace opens up to outsiders, increasing the multiple worlds of interactions. This reality will be illustrated in the next section.

## The Daily Routine of *peones* and *changarines* at the BACWM

Odd-jobbers or *peones* at the BACWM are men who receive little money for doing a variety of tasks. *Peones* are wholesalers' employees and work from 5 AM until their boss (a wholesaler) decides to call it a day. *Peones* are in charge mainly of moving fresh produce within the stall in order to show it to customers, to keep it in the cold chambers, to carry it to customers' vans whenever necessary (generally this is a *changarín*'s task), or to receive returnable wood boxes at the back of the stall [33]. Also, *peones* at *playas libres* are in charge of looking after the place during closing hours since it is not sufficiently sheltered and safe from robberies. As a rule, *peones* used to be *changarines*, who changed jobs because the activities of an odd-jobber are not as physically demanding as those of a *changarín*'s. *Peones* can use logistic devices such as forklifts to move pallets easily and quickly, do not have to work outside and do not need to look for work all the time.

These people work at the BACWM thanks to their different social networks. While *changarines* use kinship ties to find a job; *peones* make use of their past work contacts (ex-bosses or other actors involved in the fresh fruit and vegetable business). This illustrates Granovetter's argument (1983) that people who find a job by acquaintances (weak ties) have more possibilities to be involved in a wider network than people who obtain a new work position through relatives or close friends (strong ties). Weak and strong ties between *changarines* and *peones* are common elements used to find and keep jobs. *Peones* – frequently with more past work experience – are more likely to hear about new jobs through weak ties than *changarines*. However, both of these unskilled workers have the possibility to create new weak ties within their activities at the BACWM. For them, this marketplace represents their main source of labour. That is why they are prepared to defend it with their own body if necessary. The following experience illustrates this very well.

It was Monday 14 January 2002, the national economy was in a chaos and there were a lot of people out of a job. Some of them were, and still are, organised in a social movement called *piqueteros* (Svampa and Pereyra 2003). That day, 500 *piqueteros* decided to go and ask for fresh fruit and vegetables at the BACWM since *piqueteros* were told by politicians that there was a lot of fresh produce there (Del Piero 2003, Galván 2002). However, they did not accept the amount of fresh produce offered by the Corporation authorities and thus kept blocking the way by which the BACWM's users (greengrocers, other wholesalers, etc.) needed to pass. This led to a fight, where some *piqueteros* were hurt with stones and sticks by *peones* and *changarines*. One of the *peones* told me that they did not hurt women in that disturbance, but that he believed both men and women belonging to this social movement were lazy people. Nevertheless, this *peón* was a little disappointed with his

[33] This results from wholesalers charging customers the value of the fresh fruit and vegetable boxes in order to receive them back and return them to producers. This task is not seen at the so-called third generation wholesale markets, where all producers send their production in non-returnable cardboard boxes (Green 2002, Green 2003).

boss's attitude since he never thanked him for defending the stall (Field note 55c). This violent story shows how critical the struggles to win spaces are in the different social arenas at the BACWM, since they also involve outsiders like the *piqueteros*. The *changarines* and *peones* decided to defend their work space in spite of their bosses' indifference because these groups of social actors did not want to lose their daily earnings, particularly *changarines* who are paid daily. Although this incident was part of everyday life, it seemed to be more intense, more graphic and more raw than the usual everyday practices (Merrifield 2006: 14). This incident shows how the worst-paid people defend this marketplace, even using violence if necessary. In the next two sections, these social groups will be analysed through their own practices and life stories. These elements can offer a good representation to understand why these loyal social actors can defend their jobs the way they do. These people find their identity and daily livelihood at the BACWM.

**The Daily Routine of an Odd-jobber (Peón)**

To understand how *peones* construct their own space it is necessary to follow them in their everyday lives (picture 3.9). Mr. T, the *peón* chosen as a case-study, works for a company owning three stalls. He started working in this company after his former boss went bankrupt. Mr. T was born in the Province of Chaco, and remembers his youth with happiness, although he is aware that he and his friends used to live outside the law. But he is not the only one. This lifestyle has led many *peones* and *changarines* to live in jail for a while, where they learn codes and new ways to communicate. Although I did not see fist-fights among them, they told me that there were frequent fights and, like in jail, everybody watched these incidents but nobody tried to stop them (Field note 52b). Another aspect of their codes is that they have their own words to refer to prices and buyers' behaviour. Obviously, vendors know these words since these are part of the fresh fruit and vegetable wholesale markets' tradition. These words are linked to lottery symbols, such as animals. For instance: 'hen' can mean either $ 25 or a product that is not usually sold in a particular stall; *barrefondo* is a buyer who comes to buy the last offer of the day, looking for bargain prices; and *bagayo* is a large amount of parcels that need to be loaded for buyers, which is an opportunity to make a good deal for *changarines* who are paid for loading boxes (Field note 8g, 52b, 55a). Mr. T is part of this world and knows that he needs to work hard to earn $30 a day (less than € 8). Since this is not enough to make a living, he works at a cemetery, burying dead people every Saturday, and also mowing his neighbours' lawns on Sundays. He wakes up at 3 AM. on Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays to be at the stall at 5 PM. The rest of the week he can sleep one more hour since the daily work is not so heavy. He lives in Monte Grande, 15 km from the BACWM, and thus has to take two buses to go to work.

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Mr. T's working day starts when he arrives at the stall at around 6 AM. The day I followed him around, one of the vendors approached him and told him: '*We are checking the numbers of fresh fruit and vegetable boxes. If the number of boxes is not the same as the one we had yesterday, we will not start work'* (Field note 55b). This was because some boxes had been stolen the day before, and they were afraid of being blamed for the short-fall. After counting the boxes and making sure none were missing, Mr. T and the other four *peones* started working.

One of Mr. T's tasks is to take the pallets of fresh fruit and vegetables from the cold chambers and distribute them among the stalls, according to the vendors' suggestions. He then has to open some of the boxes of the 20 different kinds of fruit and vegetables in order to show them to buyers. Customers start to ask for prices at 5 AM, looking for quality and quantity of the fresh produce displayed.

When a sale is made, Mr. T is asked to put the sold boxes out of the sales room in order to avoid a resale. After paying, the buyer comes with an informal invoice that enables him/her to pick up his/her purchase at the end of his/her market visit. Buyers usually treat Mr. T in a friendly way and ask him to load the parcels in their vehicle. By doing so, Mr. T has the chance to get tips. He is an intermediary between buyers and vendors since he can choose fresh produce by quality and size. Consequently, old or experienced greengrocers usually bring small gifts or money, or invite him for a beer to gain his favours. These favours are linked to the possibility that the *peón* is able to select the best quality within the stall for his spoilt buyers, opening boxes and selecting the best items from each box. According to vendors, in order to favour his customers, some crafty *peones* can even exchange the lid of cardboard boxes of high-quality fresh produce (which are always more expensive than the standard ones) and put it in a cardboard box of low quality (Interview 4). However, this is a risky task since most people at the market can differentiate between quality levels.

Once again, this case shows the conflict of interests generated between the different groups of actors working at a stall. As shown before, vendors disapprove of peon's disloyalty to their bosses. However, *peones* manage to go beyond wholesalers' interests, pursuing to increase their income by giving favours to buyers. So, *peones* manipulate some decisions made during the buying and selling process to receive good tips from buyers. They are always under vendors' and bosses' orders and they know that they work more hours than their formal contract stipulates (Field note 52b). Therefore, it seems that *peones* look to create their own space at the stall, negotiating with outsiders like buyers do.

Each stall at the BACWM has its own routine and environment. At the stall where Mr. T works, for instance, nobody drinks *mate* (traditional infusion), and some of the workers sometimes buy stuff from food pedlars passing by (sellers who offer pizzas, sandwiches, quiches and small meat pies called *empanadas*). Mr. T prefers to have lunch at the barbecue grills situated around pavilions, where he meets friends, plays the lottery and drinks beer. This is a place controlled and occupied by *peones* and *changarines*. Around pavilions they also organise their own barbecues, where they 'cook' their own business and meals (Interview 2).

After lunch, Mr. T goes on with his job, which is sometimes interrupted with his visit to other pavilions to meet other *peones*. At the end of the working day, vendors count the number of boxes they have sold and check the remaining stock. *Peones* are in charge of counting and taking them into the cold chambers, whereas vendors and wholesalers put in order the cash with their sales bills and write down the number of remaining boxes of each fresh produce. Mr. T's workday finishes approximately at 5 PM. He ends up very tired, and thus usually falls asleep on the bus on the way home.

### The Daily Routine of a Porter/*Changarín*

*Changarines* are the most cheerful people at the BACWM (picture 3.6). They consider their job to be one of the most important ones and feel they are the soul and the owners of the BACWM (Viteri 2009). They feel that if they did not keep an eye on the stalls and the fresh produce every night, the BACWM would not be able to subsist. However, they acknowledge that they can be substituted easily by others if they get ill or any of their children have a fever. This makes them have contradictory feelings about their own status as workers. On the other hand, most of the *changarines* are renowned for attending demonstrations to assist politicians in their campaings.

Many closing events of election campaigns have been held at the BACWM (Del Piero 2003, Obarrio 2008) because of the presence of *changarines*. One of the employees at a stall, who used to be a *changarín*, told me:

> 'Politicians always use changarines. Politicians need people, drug addicts, and heavy drinkers ready to shout non-stop at their political acts. About 100 or 200 changarines go frequently to these kinds of demonstrations. A lot of money is involved here [referring to the BACWM as a source of hooligans for political and other meetings]' (Interview 55c, 24 January 2007).

Although *changarines* are involved in different tasks, their main activity is to carry fresh fruit and vegetables. Hence, the *changarín* is a person who is in charge of unloading trucks arriving at the marketplace and loading buyers' vans or cars. Many *changarines* working at the BACWM are associated with co-operatives (see Chapter 2), whereas others are not linked to any union and thus call themselves free *changarines*. Wholesalers with stalls located at

pavilions are forced to hire *changarines* associated with co-operatives, whereas wholesalers at *playas libres* can hire free *changarines*.

During my fieldwork (2006–2008), free *changarines* used to charge between 30 and 50 cents for each box carried to retailers (more or less 10 euro cents). Some of them also worked at night, unloading trucks. Mr. D, the 28 year old free *changarín* selected as a case-study, feels that in spite of the little money he gets, being a *changarín* is a good way to make a living:

> 'I come here twice a week. I started working here because my father does. I like the 'market'. I really enjoy this place. There is a huge flow of money here. You can make at least 30 pesos a day, while in the construction sector you have to wait until the weekend to receive your weekly payment' (Interview 8i, 28 January 2007).

Mr. D shows how important close relationships are in order to find a job as a *changarín* at the BACWM. Most of them start to ask for a *'changa'* (job of little importance) using the references of their relatives or neighbours. Then, they need to earn the wholesaler's trust and benevolence in order to get hired in the unloads. Since Mr. D's work is 'freelance' during delivery time at the BACWM, he needs to be very dynamic when looking for new work opportunities.

While he and one of the employees at the stall are listening to a football match between Argentina and Uruguay on the radio, Mr. D explains to me how the delivery is organised:

> 'The truck stops at the stall where one of the co-operatives is in charge of controlling how many boxes or products belong to each wholesaler. This is only in the case of one truck-load belonging to more than two wholesalers. Another changarín is responsible for controlling that nobody steals any parcels while the truck goes from one stall to another. I don't have this responsibility. I come here when I need money' (Field note 49a, 28 January 2007).

Mr. D enjoys his freedom and likes to be separet from associated *changarines*. He tells me that he has to make an effort to keep himself awake during his long work day (11 hours), trying to keep moving, working and eating (since bars are open at night). He acknowledged that his job demands a lot of physical effort, but that it is not as bad as construction work. However, despite this physical effort, Mr. D feels free and works when he needs money, without having to obey the orders of a 'boss'.

The day I followed Mr. D around, he was asked to peel squash, because a restaurant owner was coming early in the morning to pick them up. Although he and the employees at the stall exchanged some opinions about the football match between Argentina and Uruguay, they did not talk much. At about 9.30 PM, when they were about to finish the task, a truck with watermelons arrived from the North of Argentina. Their task now was to unload 800 watermelons from this truck. Since the merchandise was shared with another wholesaler, they could not take only the large ones. In order to unload the truck, one of

the workers climbed onto the truck, selected the watermelons and passed them to another worker standing in a queue, who was, in turn, in charge of passing the watermelons to another worker, and so on. The task of the last worker was to arrange the watermelons according to three different sizes. When carrying out this task, workers must be careful not to throw the watermelons on the floor because when they get smashed they lose their commercial value. The unloading was not continuous. Sometimes they changed positions, drank water and rested for a few minutes. While they were counting the 800 watermelons, an employee from another stall (the owner of the other half of the load) came to control the quality and size selected. They finally finished unloading the watermelons at about midnight. The owner of the stall settled the payment and gave Mr. D some money for a sandwich and a beverage. Immediately after that Mr. D went to look for another delivery. According to other *changarines* who work with him, Mr. D does not accept food because he prefers drugs to food.

Mr. D thanks God because there is always work at the BACWM and expressed thus: '*Work is like a dog, if he doesn't look for bones, he can't eat. So, if I don't look for a job, I can't get money*'. Mr. D has been working freelance since 2000. Although he does not belong to a co-operative, he knows that if he has an accident at the BACWM, any of the co-operatives will pay him in order to avoid being sued (a frequent practice among *changarines*, advised by lawyers). This is part of Mr. D's and other *changarines*' ways to survive at this marketplace. Although Mr. D defines himself as a free *changarín*, he does not have enough customers to work as an independent worker. So, he has to rely on others who pay him a fixed amount of money every day. He explains how he organises his work during the day:

> 'I don't belong to a co-operative, I'm free. I work for other guys who are responsible for distributing fresh produce to their customers (greengrocers, wholesalers of other wholesale markets, etc.). They give me the trolley and I work for their clients. They also allow other changarines to use the trolleys by charging $ 3 a day (€ 0.8). They give me only 30 pesos a day (less than € 8). They never give me a bagayo (a huge amount of parcels to be loaded) to deliver to retailers. They keep those for themselves, giving me small quantities of parcels. But, I manage to get my own clients. And I make about $ 40 or 50 a day (€ 12)' (Field note 8g, 9 March 2007).

Mr. D's explanation of his connections to create an opportunity to work during opening hours at the marketplace shows a complex network generated from the task of loading vans or trucks for the buyers at the BACWM. It seems that free *changarines* need these informal organisations (small mafias) to get a trolley and customers. Besides these opportunities of work at the BACWM, Mr. D and some of his colleagues make a living by working as *changarines* at different wholesale markets. Thus, he is against the general opinion that *changarines* are only hooligans or people outside the law. He explains this using his own experience:

> 'It is not true that all changarines spend their earnings on alcohol. I'm going to be honest with you: when I was younger – and a boludo [slang for stupid] – I used to spend all my money on alcohol. Once, when I was 17, and I arrived home – actually somebody brought me home totally drunk – my mum wanted to kill me. But that doesn't mean we are thieves. Of course, some changarines used to be in jail for stealing or killing. But we are not all thieves…' (Field note 8g, 9 March 2007).

The everyday lives of *changarines* show a multiplicity of ways of living. There are those who work hard and then use their earnings to buy alcohol, sex and drugs. Others try to improve their family's living conditions, even working weekends on other activities. Both extremes mean working hard for little money, although they consider it enough to support themselves. They are proud of themselves and believe they own the BACWM more than anyone else, since they work many hours and spend a lot of time there. Through their intensive working hours, they appropriate part of the space of fresh fruit and vegetable distribution, going beyond the BACWM's walls by way of their relationships with other wholesale markets and national politicians.

Most *changarines* at the BACWM are Argentinean.[34] Despite the national homogeneity, they have their conflicts of interests. Their differences are linked to political issues, drugs and different lifestyles. Some of them go to the market to earn money with their own physical effort, dispensing political and drug deals. *Changarines* are very proud of themselves, but they also feel marginalised. An elder *changarín*, who belonged to one of the co-operatives, explained the following:

> 'I'm part of this co-operative called New Millennium. We unload trucks. Free changarines are in charge of free of unloading. Thus, we work at night at delivery hours. The co-operative also has watchmen, because if trucks are delayed we have to unload the produce in the morning. There are many freelance changarines like it was in the past. I remember that I used to unload the produce without any union protection. I'm 62 years old, and when I came to the BACWM I had to adapt myself to the new conditions, trying to be part of a co-operative. I prefer belonging to a co-operative because of my age. I can't carry as many parcels as I used to in the past.'
>
> 'A changarín's life is not easy at all. It is a mystery. The BACWM is a mystery. It seems wonderful, but it is not. The environment among changarines is cruel and hard. New gangs are probably more manageable, since they do not have to carry bulk on their backs since they can use trolleys. However, some of these young people copy vulgar manners from old changarines. They settle their

[34] In other metropolitan wholesale markets most *changarines* are Bolivians. This situation creates ethnic struggles between Bolivians and Argentineans (Pizarro 2007).

> conflicts with their fists, particularly the freelance ones' (Field note 8d, 31 January 2007).

Although this man is a *changarín*, he explained the job as an outsider since he does not work as hard as in the past. Nevertheless, he is part of the *changarín* world and his body shows a life of strong work. There are many interesting stories about *changarines* at the BACWM. Some of these stories are linked to other tasks beyond carrying fresh fruit and vegetables, such football hooliganism (*barras bravas*), political conflicts (stopping dissidents through violence) and demonstrations (Tenembaum 2008). A very famous *changarín* is Batata Juárez. He is a close friend of various important national and local politicians. He was part of the Corporation staff until Patti's intervention in 1993 dismissed him (Interview 37e; Obarrio 2008). Consequently, the heterogeneous group of *changarines* can be seen as a link between politicians, other wholesale markets, and different social actors at the BACWM. *Changarines* have the ability to belong to different spaces at the same time since they have to rely on different social actors in order to make a living.

## Conclusions

This chapter showed that the BACWM is more than a group of buildings and facilities. Social actors and fresh fruit and vegetables make this marketplace come alive. Behind the commercial transactions lie passions, symbols, codes and values that are part of these social interactions constructing the BACWM as a marketplace. These elements constitute the materiality part of this social space. It means that social interactions, specific meeting places and social networks are constructed through market devices, fresh produce, knowledge, and so on. Each of the social actors working at the BACWM acquires a social significance in terms of memory, loyalty, brokerage, experiences and group identity. Thus, the 'material' and the 'social' are intertwined at the BACWM (Cf. Dale 2005).

By tagging along some of the different social actors who work at the BACWM, it was possible to analyse different social groups who struggle for their own space. In this case, these struggles generate a circulation of commodities, knowledge and power between and among groups. The groups of people include their ambiguities and conflicts within their group and with other groups. However, as shown in this chapter, they identify themselves with a particular social group.

The everyday practices of quality control show the complex and heterogeneous situations that administration actors have to confront and negotiate. Mr. O's case illustrated the importance of analysing everyday life to understand how people construct a place through their practices and normative regulations that are not always configured by a clear consensus.

Vendors' interactions with wholesalers, growers, customers, inspectors or other Corporation employees express the different ways in which this particular social group makes use of its own memory and experience. Since

most of them had bad experiences as entrepreneurs, they feel at a disadvantage to their bosses. They admire their bosses, because wholesalers can achieve goals that they missed a long time ago. However, they use their past experiences to identify themselves as experts in fresh fruit and vegetable commercialisation.

*Peones* and *changarines* feel they are the soul of the BACWM because they spend a lot of hours there. In some ways, they demonstrate this through their practices, such as defending the BACWM against potential conflicts with outsiders (*piquetero*), and their important and invisible jobs of loading and unloading fresh fruit and vegetables.

The interesting assemblage of heterogeneous social actors meeting at the BACWM every day constitutes a special social space of action that goes beyond the walls of this marketplace, attracting outsiders like politicians, pedlars, growers and buyers. Their practices explain the BACWM as a non-Euclidean space (Law 1997, Murdoch 2006).

# 4 Seven Wholesalers, One Marketplace, Multiple Realities

*'Norberto Redigo, born in 1935, started working as a wholesaler in Saldías Market in the 1960s. In 1984 he moved to the BACWM. During his working life, he developed the most important thing: a truthful and honourable surname, through his own enterprise. Then, he left the management of the firm in the hands of his son but still used to help him every day at the BACWM. He, like other pioneer wholesalers, felt that this marketplace was part of his own life. On 22nd October 2007, he suffered from a heart attack and died precisely at the BACWM, precisely where he had spent many hours of his life.'*

*Fragment of one of Norberto Redigo's friends' letter to the BACWM's chairman, 2007*

## Introduction

Most wholesalers, like Norberto Redigo in the epigraph of this chapter, devote their lives to wholesale activities. Through their everyday practices and interactions with vendors, porters and civil servants (see Chapter 3),

wholesalers contribute to building and developing the BACWM. The capacity of wholesalers to create social networks adds to the significant role that they play in the process of exchange at the BACWM. Since they are the link between different actors and functions, they constitute the backbone of the fresh fruit and vegetable circulation at this marketplace.

Wholesalers' diverse understandings, skills and believes are part of the heterogeneous assemblage of people and things that constitutes the BACWM. By producing and reproducing their lives as wholesalers, they have the ability to influence other social actors and actions (cf. Arce 2000, Boissevain 1974, Giddens 1979, Long 2001a, Long 2008). They use these abilities to ensure the survival of their firms and to achieve successful businesses. They have to face different challenges in order to maintain themselves as wholesalers. Therefore, the question that guides this chapter is: How do wholesalers construct different ways and strategies to deal with the changes in the world of fresh fruit and vegetable distribution?

In order to grasp the meaning of the activities developed by wholesalers at the BACWM, I engaged myself in their everyday practices, refusing to split their activities into social and economic ones. As shown in Chapter 1, economic activities are part of social arenas, where different life-worlds, discourses and practices intersect. This environment affects social actors' behaviours (Granovetter 1985, Smelser and Swedberg 1994b), and social actors' activities also impact upon other things and other persons' actions (Long 2008). Therefore, this chapter focuses on wholesalers' social practices through their own individual biographies. This allows understanding the wholesalers' different strategies and interpretations of the fresh fruit and vegetable business. By talking about their lives, they attribute different meanings to the past and help us to analyse their present and future (cf. Arce 1993a, Bogdan and Taylor 1975, Knorr-Cetina 1981b, Latour 1987, Magrassi and Rocca 1986).

The biographies of seven of the wholesalers who work at the BACWM will help us to illustrate and characterise the multiple strategies that wholesalers follow in order to maintain and increase their business profits. Their beginnings as entrepreneurs, the ways of organising their stalls, and the strategies to make profit are important elements to understand how wholesalers act the way they do. Wholesalers interact, accommodate, and negotiate with each other's life-worlds to reinforce or transform commercial practices. By doing so, they show that their capacity of creating new ways of distributing fresh fruit and vegetables goes beyond their economic interests (cf. Arce 1997a, Arce 2009a, Etzioni 1988).

## Wholesalers

Since the aim of this chapter is to analyse the role of wholesalers at the BACWM, it is necessary first to define a wholesaler and his/her functions. According to the *Cambridge Dictionary*, a wholesaler is someone who buys and

sells goods in large amounts to shops and businesses. As explained in Chapter 2, a wholesaler can be defined as a person who acquires large quantities of goods from growers and resells them to retailers (supermarkets, greengrocers, or street-market stall-holders), secondary market handlers (jobbers and purveyors), institutions (prisons, schools, hospitals) or catering enterprises (restaurants, hotels, cruises) rather than to the ultimate consumers (Frigerio 1973). Alongside the managing of transactions, some wholesalers often transform fresh produce by adding value: transporting, storing, repackaging, assembling, preparing for final use, and adding information and guaranties (Ghezán et al. 1999).

Wholesalers at the BACWM can either buy directly from growers or receive fresh fruit and vegetables on consignment, which is the most frequent way to be supplied by growers. Wholesalers get around 12% of the value on every sale. Since they know that growers bring their fresh produce to different wholesalers, they need to be competitive at offering a good deal to their suppliers. In some cases, wholesalers and growers agree on a price before selling. The wholesalers interviewed explained that they make an effort to maintain their suppliers' trust. They do so by exchanging information, communication and knowledge in repetitive purchases to reduce uncertainties. However, distrust between parts is a common characteristic of this type of exchanges. Thus, in order to avoid misunderstandings, both growers and wholesalers attempt to integrate commercial or production activities, i.e. growers prefer to rent a stall and become wholesalers, whereas wholesalers usually involve themselves in primary production.

In addition, wholesalers can either produce fresh fruit and vegetables or have third parties do so by informal agreements. Some wholesalers start as middlemen and, then, they involve themselves in the primary production. Others are growers first and then become wholesalers in order to control their own sales. These multiple ways of distribution generate an assemblage of relations between growers, wholesalers and different retailers and secondary market handlers (for more details, see Figures 2.3 and 2.4 in Chapter 2).

Civil servants at the BACWM Corporation (MCBA 2007) classify wholesalers according to their productivity. They construct a database through the product way-bill and wholesalers' statements. According to civil servants, these data lack rigorous elements since the way-bill system takes into account only the first transaction of resales between wholesalers within the BACWM. Besides, some wholesalers declare fewer sales and change their company's names in order to avoid paying income taxes or old debts. In spite of these shortcomings, statistics are useful to put into context the seven wholesalers studied in this chapter (see Table 4.1).

*Table 4.1. Characteristics of the seven case-studies*

| Case-Study | Company Size | Supply Value (Argentinean $/year)[35] | Volume (average in kilos) |
|---|---|---|---|
| 1. Mr. A | Small | < 2,000,000 | 2,000,000 |
| 2. Mr. F | | | |
| 3. Mr. K | Small-Medium | 2,000,000 – 3,999,999 | 2,750,000 |
| 4. Mr. N | | | |
| 5. Mr. S | Medium | 4,000,000 – 9,999,999 | 5,100,000 |
| 6. Mr. P | | | |
| 7. Mr. Z | Large | > 10,000,000 | 14,000,000 |

*Source: Based on MCBA's data base (2007)*

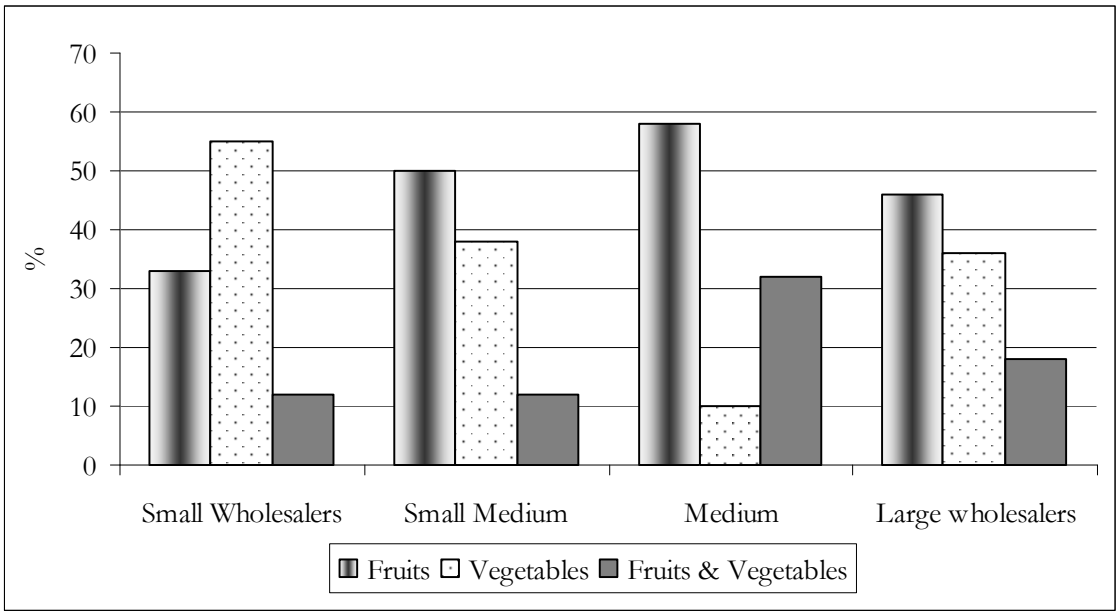
The first two cases (Mr. A and Mr. B) are classified as small wholesalers because they commercialise less than two million pesos a year and sell an average of two million kilos of fresh produce. Small–medium-size wholesalers commercialise approximately the same value and volume than the small ones, but show differences in the kind of products they sell. Medium wholesalers exceed small wholesalers' sale volumes by 155% and handle an average value of $ 8,000,000.

Mr. Z's company is the only case-study that classifies as a large company. The firm supplies an annual value of around 18 million and sells more than 860,000 boxes of fruits per year. They are investing continuously in cold chambers and other facilities. Enterprises of this kind represent only 3% of the approximately 500 wholesalers working at the BACWM. In 2006, the large wholesalers commercialised 17% of the total value and volume of fresh fruit and vegetables sold at the BACWM (MCBA 2007).

Wholesalers at the BACWM use different strategies according to their opportunities and possibilities to improve their businesses throughout the years. Part of these strategies is linked to the type of fresh produce they offer. According to the more than 180 interviews carried out by myself at the BACWM between 2006 and 2007, it is possible to assume that small wholesalers are more specialised in vegetables, while medium wholesalers prefer selling fruits only or sell both. The case-studies presented in this chapter are more or less in accordance with these specialisations. The following graphic illustrates the different proportions of selling either fruit or vegetables or both according to the size of the wholesalers' enterprises.

[35] In 2006, according to Argentina National Bank, the currency exchange was $ 3.9 = € 1 (http://www.bna.com.ar).

***Figure 4.1. Proportion of Fresh Produce Supplied by Wholesalers of Different Sizes.***




*Source: Based on interviews 2006-2007*

The graphic above shows that small wholesalers prefer selling vegetables rather than fruit. Most of them usually sell leaf vegetables, tomatoes and fresh peppers. This is linked with their small capacity to invest in facilities such as cold chambers. Mr. A, for instance, sells root vegetables such as potato, onion and garlic, while Mr. F sells mainly pumpkin, onion and watermelon. The latter is sold only in summer-time. These two wholesalers do not own land for growing vegetables, but make informal contracts with growers.

Small wholesalers who sell only fruit usually focus mainly on citrus, a preference that seems to be linked with the possibility to handle them without using cold chambers. Most small wholesalers do not sell both fruit and vegetables, because this would imply an investment in capacity to acquire a considerable amount of fresh produce. This is also observed in the small-medium-size group. Most of these entrepreneurs focus on selling exclusively fresh fruit or vegetables. Most of them sell third-party products. However, some of them sell their own produce, especially citrus and root vegetables like potatoes, onions and carrots.

The small–medium- and medium-size wholesalers are differentiated by the kind of fresh produce they handle in a year. In our case–studies, Mr. K and Mr. N (small–medium-size wholesalers) are specialised in leaf vegetables, while Mr. S and Mr. P (medium-size wholesalers) supply both fruit and vegetables. The medium-size wholesalers have chosen this as a strategy to survive in times of economic crises and to cope with their customers' requirements

(Interviews 29, 55, 62, 72). So, diversification implies entering new markets to increase the probability of the firm's survival. Multiple products can reduce the dependence on a few products (Fligstein 1996).

Most medium-size wholesalers are responsible for tree plantations or greenhouses in different geographical regions of Argentina. Few of them are dedicated exclusively to fresh vegetables. Case-studies 5 and 6 (Mr. S and Mr. P) started as suppliers of vegetables and fruits respectively, but nowadays they offer both fruit and vegetables.

Large-size enterprises are divided into exclusive fruit or vegetable suppliers. Nevertheless, a few of them offer both fruit and vegetables at their stalls in order to diversify and increase volume of sales. As shown above, Mr. Z sells exclusively fresh fruit at the BACWM and, like medium-size wholesalers, also has a variety of customers, from small retailers to secondary market handlers, supermarkets, fast-food places and institutional canteens.

These different ways of organising the distribution of fresh fruit and vegetables is not given by chance. Behind each of these multiple organisations, there is a history that explains, in part, the commercial strategies followed by each wholesaler at the BACWM.

## Multiple Origins of Wholesalers

Except for Mr. F and Mr. K, most of the wholesalers studied started their businesses before the creation of the BACWM. While Mr. F did not have any experience with wholesale markets before, Mr. K's family used to sell their own products at different marketplaces. Table 4.1 shows the marketplace and year in which each wholesaler studied started as a wholesale entrepreneur. The third column describes the first activity they carried out in the world of fresh fruit and vegetables and the fourth column indicates the number of family generations in the business (see pictures from 4.1 to 4.7).

***Table 4.2 Origins of the Seven Case-Studies.***

| Case | Start Marketplace | Start Year | First Main Activity | Generation |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **1 Mr. A** | Morón | 1969 | Distribution | 1 |
| **2 Mr. F** | BACWM | 1985 | Production | 1 |
| **3 Mr. K** | BACWM | 1992 | Production | 2 |
| **4 Mr. N** | 3 de Febrero | 1976 | Production | 2 |
| **5 Mr. S** | Spinetto | 1982 | Distribution | 1 |
| **6 Mr. P** | Abasto | 1930 | Production | 3 |
| **7 Mr. Z** | Abasto | 1911 | Distribution | 4 |

*Source: Based on interviews*

The seven case-studies selected have been in the fresh fruit and vegetable business for at least 15 years. Cases 6 (Mr. P) and 7 (Mr. Z) are part of families with a long history in the business (more than two generations). In terms of heterogeneous origins, Mr. P belongs to a family who started as growers, whereas Mr. Z is part of a company always linked to fresh fruit export activities.

The number of stalls and employees hired at the BACWM by these entrepreneurs is linked to the size of the company. In general, the small and small–medium wholesalers rent between one and two stalls in only one pavilion or *playa libre*, while medium and large wholesalers rent more than two stalls. Besides, most large wholesalers, particularly those who sell potatoes and fruits, have stalls in more than one pavilion in order to increase the number of potential buyers. Small wholesalers are assisted by no more than two or four employees, while medium and large wholesalers take between 10 and 20 workers into service at the stalls. They are sellers, cashiers, and *peones* (odd-jobbers).

Each commercial venture relates to an individual entrepreneur's biography that builds up the social life and commercial activity of each wholesaler at the BACWM. According to wholesalers' expressions, their business activities are part of their own social lives. So, following them in their everyday practices allows having a picture of them as businessmen.

***Picture 4.1. Wholesaler: Case-Study 1.***


*Source: MLV*

***Picture 4.2 Wholesaler: Case-Study 2***

Source: MLV

***Picture 4.3 Wholesaler: Case-Study 3***


*Source: MLV*

***Picture 4.4. Wholesaler: Case-Study 4.***


*Source: MLV*

***Picture 4.5. Wholesaler: Case-Study 5***


*Source: MLV*

***Picture 4.6. Wholesaler: Case-Study 6***


*Source: MLV*

*Picture 4.7. Wholesaler: Case-Study 7*


*Source: MLV*

## Life Histories

The multiple origins of these wholesalers' enterprises are part of the rich diversity found throughout the BACWM. **Mr. A** (67 years old) rents two stalls to sell root vegetables such as potatoes (eight different classes according to variety, origin and added value), garlic and onions (Picture 4.1). At a relaxed moment at his stalls, Mr. A recounts his life:

> 'My father is Croatian. He fled from his country to Argentina as a stowaway after War World II. He got married and was able to buy a beautiful house from credit granted by the National Bank. But when my mother and my father got divorced, my mother and I had to move to a much smaller house and to a much poorer neighbourhood. I was 14 years old and it was not easy at all. I used to watch a lamp with 30 light bulbs and then I had to get used to watching a cardboard ceiling. I also had to start working to help my mum and although in the beginning I had nothing, nowadays I run an enterprise and my sons have their own companies here, at this marketplace. That is why I feel like Julius Caesar [referring to the dictator of the Roman Republic].'

> 'When my father left us, I joined the Navy. But, three years later I left and started to work as a cartonero (scavenger)36 and as a taxi-driver. Once a man (God keeps him in His Glory) asked me if I could drive him to the Dorrego wholesale market every day. One time, I got off the taxi and watched a large pile of merchandise, so I asked for a job there. I started as a porter, then as a vendor until I achieved my own stall at the Morón wholesale market. I was 28 years old then, which means I already have seven years of experience in buying and selling root vegetables' (Interview 46, 6 February 2007).

Mr. A reaffirms that nobody helped him and he did not inherit anything, except for his education. According to him, education is to not bribe, to tell the truth and to be honest; and this is what he wants to teach to his grandchildren. Nevertheless, other wholesalers and vendors at the BACWM refer to him as a crafty wholesaler who knows how to win new customers from other wholesalers in dishonest ways (Interview 47).

Mr. A, like other wholesalers, dresses in fashion shirts and is always clean because he never moves any potato bags. Mr. A's appearance seems to be a sign of the social difference between a wholesaler and his employees. The nice appearance, which is observed in many wholesalers, can be linked to certain social stigma. As shown in Chapter 2, wholesalers were always associated with poor European immigrants, while other food actors, such as large cereal and livestock farmers, are mainly associated with traditional and aristocratic families (Gerarduzzi 2000). Probably, the ertswhile stigma attached to wholesalers makes them address porters in a pejorative way. Some of the wholesalers consider porters and *peones* as *cabecitas negras* (small black heads), [37] thus highlighting their cultural and economic differences, although some wholesalers started business as *peones*. Wholesalers use slang when they deal with porters and *peones* in order to improve their communication. A young wholesaler who looked like a university student rather than a wholesaler (Interview 39) said to me: 'This marketplace makes you a bad-mannered person. I also use slang to communicate with them'. So, on the one hand, wholesalers strive to differentiate themselves from other social actors at the BACWM and, on the other hand, they aim at building networks with heterogeneous groups of people.

**Mr. F** and **Mr. K**, 52 and 45 years old respectively, are different from Mr. A's case. They became wholesalers after being growers. Mr. F used to be a milkman and Mr. K used to work with his father and father-in-law, growing vegetables in their own gardens in González Catán (Buenos Aires). They used to deliver their production to different wholesale markets until the BACWM

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[36] *Cartonero* is a person who collects cardboard or glasses (recyclable items) from the rubbish to sell them for a small refund. Mr. A (Case-study 1) used to collect glasses, bottles and empty sackcloths.

[37] Racist expression used frequently by better-off Argentineans to refer to poor and bad-mannered people. Eva Perón (the First Lady of Argentina from 1946 to 1952) used to address them in a loving way as her *descamisados* (those who do not wear a shirt).

was opened (1984). Before deciding to open their own stall at this marketplace in 1992, they delivered green vegetables to wholesalers on consignment.

While Mr. K's story is an example of the many cases of growers who decided to integrate their primary production with commercialisation, **Mr. F** (Picture 4.2) started working at the BACWM without any kind of experience in fresh fruit and vegetable commercialisation. Since Mr. F's family had a dairy farm that was run by his father, as a child Mr. F used to go to school and supply milk to a factory situated nearby. Mr. F loved helping his father in the factory. But when his father died, his family gave up this activity. After that, although he did not like studying, he finished Military School and became an air-force pilot through a scholarship offered by a Yugoslavian fellow countryman who was a friend of his father's. He also fought in the Malvinas War in 1982. He carried on at the Military School, though he wanted to come back to work in the countryside. So one day, when a chaplain, who was a very good friend of his, told him about the possibility to rent a stall at the recently opened BACWM he didn't doubt it.

During my interviews at the BACWM, Mr. F and his wife tell me about their arrival in Buenos Aires from the countryside:

> 'We came from a small town, so we were not aware of the 'dangers' of big cities like Buenos Aires. Since we knew nothing about wholesaling, we decided to rely on our employee who used to work in the stall before we came. But, of course, the problem was that he was an 'expert' employee and we were 'inexpert' entrepreneurs. Since he knew the large buyers who used to buy a considerable volume at our stall he used to advise us to reduce the price. In the beginning this was excellent. We learnt how to win buyers. But we also soon learnt that our employee was cheating on us. After losing the value of a full pumpkin truck, we realised that our vendor was not reducing the price to large buyers. Since pumpkins are supplied in bulk and sold by the kilo, he was slowly taking kilos and kilos of pumpkins. So, a full truck of merchandise was the cost of learning how to manage an employee. We could have had duplicate tickets to avoid this, but we were 'inexpert' entrepreneurs in the beginning' (Field note 49, 30 January 2007).

This experience explains how the 'inexpert' couple faced new social codes and how they overcame these experiences when they became wholesalers. After some bad experiences, they also learnt how to organize their enterprise by combining it with their impulse to fight for and conquer a new place at the BACWM and in a large city like Buenos Aires. His wife no longer helps her husband at the stall, but one of his sons does.

**Mr. N**'s biography (Case-study 4) is one of the many stories of Italian immigrants [38] (picture 4.4). He was born in a village in Calabria in 1939. During and after World War II, he had to face starvation, and his father had to mill wheat at night in order to avoid the militaries, who used to take food from them. In 1948, when Mr. N was about 9 years old, his uncle invited them to come and live in Argentina, where he had been successfully settled since 1928. Mr. N remembers his arrival in Argentina with happiness:

> 'I was 9 years old, but I remember the moment as if it was yesterday. We arrived on Sunday 7 February 1950. My uncle, my uncle's family, and my uncle's friends had prepared a huge barbeque for us. There were 80 Italians altogether! My uncle helped us to settle in Buenos Aires. During my first months, I used to go to the Liniers wholesale market with my uncle because my cousin had a greengrocer's shop there.'
>
> 'Then, I started primary school and, although I was in 4th grade in Italy, I had to move back two levels because I didn't speak the language. When I finished the 6th level I went to work at a garage. But soon I went to work in a car factory because the salary was not good enough. I worked there until 1960, when I had to leave because of health problems. I then set up a shoe-shop with my wife and finally, in 1976, one of my wife's nephews invited me to open a stall at 3 de Febrero wholesale market and I became a wholesaler. I knew something about agriculture because my family used to have a vegetable garden and sell fresh produce to consumers Italy'. (Interview 18A, 7 December 2006).

Mr. N's start as a wholesaler shows the importance of kinship and close relatives, since these allowed him to construct his own professional career, which was later passed on to his children. Mr. N's story is neither the attribute nor the product of only one single person, but derives from a complex network of people involving, in this case, his uncle and his wife's nephew among others (Granovetter 1973, Handelman 1976, Long 2001b).

The case-studies of the larger enterprises selected for this analysis (**Mr. S**, **Mr. P** and **Mr. Z**) also have Italian origins. Mr. S (Case-study 5) is a recent immigrant, who arrived in Argentina from Calabria in 1982, whereas Mr. P (Case-study 6) was born to an Italian immigrant family in San Juan (North-west of Argentina) in the 1950s. Mr. P's father started growing grapes both for wine and for the fresh domestic market, and Mr. P and his brothers then went on running the enterprise, extending to citrus production in Entre Ríos (North-east of Argentina). In 1984, Mr. P's father and his brothers decided to rent a

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[38] Italians arrived in Argentina in large numbers from the 1870s until the 1950s. Italian and Spanish settlements formed the backbone of Argentinean society, influencing its culture, language, customs and traditions. As one of the businessmen interviewed (Interview 34b) told me at one of the pavilions' bars: 'I'm Jewish, he is Portuguese, I don't know you, but we are all Italians. So, this is part of the culture in this marketplace'. It is worth knowing that this statement is linked only to Buenos Aires province.

stall at the BACWM, and Mr. P started working at the stalls with one of his uncles.

**Mr Z**'s grandfather (Case-study 7), the pioneer of a well-known company, arrived in Argentina in 1885 and started working as a wholesaler because he used to do this activity in Calabria. In 1911 he rented a stall at the Abasto wholesale market. When he died, one of his two sons, Mr. Z's father, took over the distribution enterprise and rented stalls in different wholesale markets (Abasto, Liniers, Avellaneda, Dorrego and Spinetto). In 1957, Mr. Z, the third generation, started to be part of the fresh produce business. They invested in pip fruit production in the south of Argentina and they were one of the first growers who exported pip fruits from Argentina to Europe during the 1960s. Nowadays, they have four stalls at one of the pavilions at the BACWM (Picture 4.7).

While Mr. Z was a secondary school student, he helped his father at his stalls in the Abasto wholesale market. Then, in 1961, when he was 24 years old, he decided to drop university because he was offered the opportunity to manage a Fruit Growers Association located in Río Negro (South-west of Argentina, where pip fruit production is the main agriculture activity). He remembers those days as follows:

> 'From 1954 to 1960, Argentina was the bread-basket of the world [referring to Argentina's food exports]. Exporting was a very easy task. We were cargo-ship loaders rather than exporters. The world was starving and we had enough production to feed the world. Once I was at Rotterdam's harbour representing different growers' enterprises, when a consultant advised me I should unify our cargo under a brand. And so I did. And I have continued with the same name until now' (Interview 19, 28 February 2007).

Mr. Z's successful first steps were driven by new combinations of different factors, such as the post-World War context and the settlement of immigrants with knowledge of fruit commercialisation and production. In addition, this entrepreneur played an important role in involving other fruit-growers in the export business. As a result, the international context encouraged Mr. Z and other growers to reshape their own enterprises, creating and developing new forms of doing business. Therefore, the combination of cause and effect allowed these growers to improve their profits. This company started a joint venture with a multinational corporation in 2007. The latter is leader in growing and packing bananas, pineapples and grapes. This was the first agreement with transnational companies of fresh fruit and vegetable distribution in Argentina.

These wholesalers' life stories show not only the different origins of their careers, but also the multiples ways of improving their own enterprises. Most of them defined the wholesaling activity as part of themselves, especially the elder ones. One of them told me the story that one morning, while he was waiting for the lift in his place in order to go to the BACWM, his wife had to stop him because it was Sunday and the BACWM was closed (fieldwork 55A,

19th January 2007). Like Norberto Redrigo at the head of this chapter, this wholesaler, like most of them, loves wholesaling. They identify themselves as entrepreneurs who have been able to achieve different goals and improve their businesses and fresh fruit and vegetable distribution by using their knowledge, experience and networks.

## Family Business: An Obstacle to Innovate?

Wholesaling is a predominantly family activity. Therefore, families divide labours among brothers, sons and daughters. Each member of the family is in charge of different activities within and outside the BACWM's stalls. Activities such as primary production, vegetable and fruit-packing, commercialisation and other multiple tasks are the responsibility of relatives or close friends. As in other wholesaling activities, it is common for women to work as administrative clerks or cashiers (cf. Bestor 2004). However, only a few stalls are run by women; if they are, it is because they are wholesalers' daughters or widows.

Family businesses are not always a synonym of trust or success. Some wholesalers, or outsiders who interact with them, point out that some of them give little freedom to their sons and daughters to innovate the firm in different aspects. However, this is not always the case: some old wholesalers show capacity to receive and pass knowledge and experience along generations. Case-studies 4 (Mr. N) and 6 (Mr. P) are good examples of the role of the family business in the access to successful innovations.

**Mr. N** (Case-study 4), for instance, is very happy for the business to rely on his two sons and his daughter. All of them are part of the firm nowadays. They meet at the stall every Friday because it is the day of larger sales (Picture 4.4). During my interview, Mr. N explains:

'I really enjoy seeing my children learn what I have taught them: mainly to be an honest worker. If I hadn't had children, I would not have continued in the business. Children are like fingers; each one is different, but useful in some way. My eldest son, for instance, helps me mend returnable boxes, whereas the youngest one is in charge of contacting different growers in order to assure merchandise. My daughter helps at the cash desk and has her own fresh-cut salad business with her boyfriend' (Interview 18A, 7 December 2006).

Mr. N, like other wholesalers, highlights his honest way of working. This emphasis seems to be a defence against the historical conception about the wholesaler's role as broker. Brokers in fresh fruit and vegetable distribution are always associated with speculative relations that make the other parties of the brokerage dependent upon their services (Chapter 2). Thus, Mr. N's desire is not only that his descendants can carry on with his business, but also that they honour their surname.

In contrast, other wholesalers, who are currently not having good profits, regret not sending their sons to school or giving them opportunities different from those of the hard work at the vegetable garden. This kind of opinion shows a certain master/pupil relationship (powerful parent/frustrated child), where fathers decide arbitrarily about the future career of their children. According to other opinions, descendants were able to develop as successful entrepreneurs when their fathers were not involved directly in wholesaling (Interviews SA 2-19, 17). This last opinion addresses the case of Mr. P (Case-study 6).

During my interview at the BACWM, **Mr. P** (Picture 4.6), who belongs to the third generation of a well-known and important enterprise, explains how critical moments in the environment and at the core of his family enterprise played a dynamic role to support new changes:

> 'Before 1984 our firm was composed only of my father and two uncles. Thus, I began to help them by sending our produce (grapes and citrus) to different wholesale markets in Buenos Aires. We used to sell our products in bulk without any packaging to no more than 10 wholesalers. This meant we sold these loaded trucks without any differentiation or added value. But when the BACWM was opened, the sales system changed and we had to adapt. Since the system of selling by truck was finished, we rented a stall at the BACWM and started selling by parcel to retailers. Thus, we changed from offering only our produce to selling different products in order to incorporate small retailers as our clients.'
>
> 'I was 22 years old, and I both worked and studied. One of my uncles and I used to work on the stall, whereas my father and another of my uncles worked at our orchards. When my uncle died in 1985, I took over the commercial part of the company, while my other uncle and my father went on sending their products to the stall. Even though both of them, particularly my uncle, did not agree with my commercial logic, they continued to send their products to the stall since we were a family business. As I was aware that the market had changed [referring to newcomers such as supermarkets], I wanted to specialise my business in good quality and added value rather than bad quality and cheap products. Since my uncle's practices did not match my new demands we ended our business relationship in 1997. I remember the day I sent back a truck-load of tangerines of unacceptable condition that my uncle had sent me. This finished our partnership. My uncle went on working by himself and my father, my other uncle's sons, and I continued working together. Thus, working with relatives is not always good. What is important is relying on faithful partners rather than clever ones' (Interview 72, 7 March 2008).

This wholesaler shows his commercial talent to go beyond the ways of selling of his predecessors. Although old generations can be reluctant to innovate, this social actor was able to deal with conflicts. It is worth noting that,

according to the wholesalers interviewed, there are more cases of submissiveness than of independent behaviour.

In short, family networks can become either a constraint or a positive influence on future economic decisions. Family ties can operate as 'spring-boards' to improve the professional career of its members. However, also it depends on the newcomers' ability to go beyond the complex network created by his or her ancestors (Leeds 1964, Long 2001a: 149).

### Diverse Ways and Strategies of Supplying and Selling

As shown above, one of the features of the fresh fruit and vegetable family business is the possibility to open new branches of the firm and to delegate them to younger generations. Mr. N (Case-study 4), for instance, was able to increase his relations with growers through one of his sons, whereas Mr. P's uncle (Case-study 6) was the pioneer in the family to integrate wholesaling into their orchard. They have increased their activities from commercial to production and vice versa by creating new networks of relationships. These multiple ways of provision imply a proliferation of networks as well as information and knowledge exchanged among growers and wholesalers.

The way in which wholesalers are supplied can illustrate the importance for them of increasing their social networks in order to improve their business. Each wholesaler has his or her own way of contacting suppliers. As shown in Table 5, the seven wholesalers studied manage their procurements by producing fresh produce themselves, receiving them from growers, or a combination of both.

*Table 4.3: Fresh Produce Procurement Forms*

| | |
|---|---|
| **1 Mr. A**<br>**2. Mr. F** | Buying from growers directly or by consignment<br>Informal agreements with growers (*mediería*: see Chapter 2) |
| **3 Mr. K** | Buying from growers or by consignment<br>Own production |
| **4 Mr. N** | Informal agreements with growers (*mediería*) |
| **5 Mr. S**<br>**6 Mr. P**<br>**7 Mr Z** | Buying from growers or by consignment<br>Informal and formal agreements with growers<br>Own production |

*SOURCE: Based on interviews and participant observation.*

Case-studies 1 and 2 (Mr. A and Mr. B) do not sell their own produce. They prefer to delegate the growing to third parties. Medium and large wholesalers tend to diversify their ways of procurement. Some of them are known because they offer a particular type of fresh produce throughout the year. Therefore, they need to contact growers in different geographical areas of Argentina. For instance, at Mr S's stalls, tomatoes, which are usually offered in the summer, are also offered in the winter. This commercial strategy means that Mr S had to develop his own greenhouses and make agreements with growers from the north of Argentina.

By focusing on the way that these seven case-studies were and are supplied, it is possible to analyse the evolution of the firms through the years. **Mr. A** (Case-study 1) was able to open new branches within the BACWM. His two sons-in-law have their own stalls and his cousin works with him at the same stall. All of them share the same suppliers because buying large volumes of products allows them to obtain competitive negotiations. In addition, when one of their suppliers does not have a particular variety of fruit or vegetable that a customer is looking for, they try to solve the shortage through other members of the family. In short, Mr. A succeeded in increasing his business by involving his own family into the activity, and did so by transferring his experience and knowledge to the next generation.

**Mr. F** (Case-study 2), who started without any experience in commercial activities, saw the opportunity to improve his business in the mid-1980s. He ventured into primary production at the same time that supermarkets arrived at the BACWM as 'new' buyers (see Chapters 2 and 6). He resumed his relationship with growers in the area where he was born, invested in agricultural machinery, and travelled to the production area in order to control production. In addition, he started running his own vegetable garden. However, since he had some difficulties to achieve some of the new supermarkets' requirements and, besides, since his vegetable garden was affected by floods, he decided to quit producing and supplying supermarkets. Nowadays Mr. F is in charge of the stall, and although he continues to contact different pumpkin and watermelon growers, his business and social networks are currently reduced. He used to buy a van every year whereas now he only runs his business as a wholesaler.

Whereas **Mr. F** attempted at innovating his customer channel with supermarkets, **Mr K** and **Mr. N** (Case-studies 3 and 4) preferred to continue selling fresh produce to their historical buyers. Their strategies to face challenges are focused on procurement. **Mr K** is an example of the growers who became wholesalers only to assure a fair price for their merchandise. Since Mr. K preferred working in the garden, he delegated the wholesale activities to a cousin. However, some misunderstandings between Mr. K and his cousin forced Mr. K to rely on his employee rather than on his relative.

Contrary to Mr. K, Case-study 3 (**Mr N**) is an illustration of wholesalers who are mainly dedicated to distribution rather than to production. With the aim of assuring their supplies, Mr. N and his children set up informal contracts with growers in two main geographical areas. One of Mr. N's sons is in charge

of supervising and co-ordinating the supply with growers who work with them. Besides this activity, he helps selling products at the stall on Fridays (the days with larger flow of clients at the BACWM).

Even though **Mr. K** (Case-study 3) and **Mr. N** (Case-study 4) complain about the difficulties of finding people to work at vegetable gardens, they still work with them either directly or indirectly because it is a good business or simply because they love growing. In spite of Mr. K's preferences for vegetable production, he decided to sow part of his land with soybean and wheat. He argues that the latter are more profitable and demand less work. However, he still works at his market garden because he likes the activity (for more details about changes in the organisation of market gardens, see Chapter 7). Despite Mr K and Mr N's claims, their enterprises show good performance. The other case-studies (5, 6 and 7) have not only increased their volume of sales but also made some innovative changes in the management of the enterprises. In the last 10 years, they have invested in cold chambers, logistic devices and other new technologies in primary production (greenhouses, new varieties). Since they supply large buyers such as supermarkets or fast-food restaurants, they also need to contact an important number of suppliers. They often set up formal contracts with some of the growers and offer them technical assistance. This means that they need to construct a dynamic network of suppliers in order to achieve the high demands of quality and logistics of their main customers. Thus, they have increased their networks by contacting growers in different geographical areas of Argentina.

The last three case-studies (5, 6, and 7) illustrate the activity developed by the so-called specialised wholesalers (for more details, see Chapter 6). They continue to supply to these buyers because they were able to invest and to surpass difficulties. These new buyers implied new ventures and new phases in these wholesalers' careers (cf. Long 2001b). In the case of Mr. P (Case-study 6, Picture 4.6), this new venture required breaking with old networks and establishing new ones. During my interview, Mr. P explained:

'In order to satisfy our new customers' demands [referring mainly to fast-food chains, and supermarkets], I decided to import fresh produce that these customers could not find in the local market. In the 1990s, we changed our way of supplying completely. While we used to sell only our own produce (grapes and citrus), we started to buy and import more than 95% of our products. This was convenient for us until 1998, when the exchange rate became no longer favourable for importing. So, I started to produce vegetables in association with growers from different geographical regions in order to meet the annual demand. It was not easy to set up these associations, but I'm convinced that this business requires you to be involved in the whole chain. If commercialisation does not cover the costs, I can take advantage from production and so on… That is why I work to assure the supply independently of prices. I could not rely on growers who sent fresh produce by consignment, since they could send those products to someone else.'

> 'Nowadays we commercialise only 10% of our volume at the BACWM. The BACWM is a market of supply and demand, and I prefer

> dealing with linear prices negotiated between parts. I earn money when prices at the BACWM are low. If I offer stable prices throughout the year, I can win large customers such as McDonald's, with which I have had an agreement since 1993. This has allowed me to invest in technology (80 hectares of greenhouses, technical assessment, cold chambers), facilities (warehouses and vegetable and fruit packaging, stalls at other wholesalers in the north and south of Argentina), and in human resources (nowadays we have 800 people working for us)' (Interview 72, 7 March 2008).

Through Mr. P's discourse and practices, it is easy to understand that he does not identify himself as a common wholesaler. He strives to go beyond the historical role of wholesalers. Therefore, he has implemented new strategies such as price agreements, associations with growers in different geographical places, new technological investments and a large diversity of fruits. In addition, within his stalls at the BACWM, he treats his employees properly, i.e. they are legally hired and get a free lunch every day.

Like Mr. P, four of the seven case-studies were already linked to primary production when they decided to become wholesalers (see Table 4). However, the large wholesalers decided to increase production because of their new buyers. This is the case of **Mr. S** (Picture 4.5). Mr. S started to liaise with growers, bought a vegetable production co-operative and invested in a repackaging and fresh-cut vegetables centre in 2000. During the interview, he explains why he decided to go beyond wholesaling:

> 'Before I decided to buy the grower co-operative, I had been spending a lot of money on other growers who did not fit the job profile that I needed. I spent a lot of time and money offering new technology to growers who preferred short-term goals over long-term ones. They wanted to earn money without working hard, so it was difficult to associate people like them in my project to supply buyers such as supermarkets. The vegetable production co-operative allowed me to be able to supply supermarkets' demands, since they had started to surpass wholesalers by buying directly from growers in order to avoid cost transactions [for more details see Chapters 6 and 7]' (Interview 29, 26 December 2006).

Mr. S's comment shows only one side of the coin in the relationship between wholesalers and growers. Growers also complain about misunderstandings with wholesalers, which is why some of the growers become wholesalers. This is linked to the different meanings and knowledge that wholesalers and growers have about fresh fruit and vegetables. Although this thesis does not analyse this particular interface between wholesalers and growers, it is worth noting the important role that this kind of interaction plays in fresh fruit and vegetable distribution.

Wholesalers attempt to bridge the gaps in communication between growers and consumers (cf. Boissevain 1974). Such a role of middlemen characterises them as competent entrepreneurs in the management of meanings. This

aptitude is observed when they remark that they always defend growers' production and retailers' earnings since they consider they are part of their businesses. They translate and decode the world of production to a world of consumption. Wholesalers refer to their job as a process itself. One of the wholesalers interviewed told me:

> 'This is a job of feelings and knowledge. It is necessary to know people who cannot pay back your merchandise. If he or she had always bought from me two tomato boxes and suddenly asked me for 10 boxes, I would have to be careful. This is like a marriage, as time passes by one gets to know the other' (Interview 6-9, November 2006).

Based on experience and 'know-how', wholesalers show the capacity to innovate, adding value to their businesses. This innovative profile has its own degrees of variation according to wholesalers' possibilities and abilities. Thus, wholesalers like Mr. S, Mr. P and Mr. Z are more visible since they achieved economic improvements by incorporating technology and knowledge into their enterprises.

The actions developed by these seven wholesalers connect their life-worlds with processes of knowledge. Thus, wholesalers consider themselves experts at the commercialisation of fresh fruit and vegetables. They have the ability to negotiate with their suppliers and buyers. One of them explained to me that his knowledge came from the experience and love he has for wholesaling. He spends many hours at work since –according to him – it is the only way to become an 'expert'. By using the concept of fresh produce quality, he expresses his ideas about 'knowledge':

> 'I have been working with fresh produce since I was 12 years old. So, I have been in the business for 50 years. If you know about quality, you don't need to buy brands. Brands are good with regard to dairy products, but the fruit tree is different. For instance, an apple tree gives you different sizes of fruits. Of course, companies classify them and you have to pay for this added value. Thus, I buy from small growers, whose lands are close to famous orchards. A person who doesn't know about quality has to pay for the brand rather than for the product itself, but fresh products are alive and tell you how they are. Their colour, smell, brightness (be careful with waxed ones) show good quality. Also, bad quality can be identified by smelling. The excess of ripeness smells old and fermented. Nevertheless, sometimes I make mistakes. That is why you need time to acquire knowledge. This is a job of experience'. (Interview 4, 10 April 2007).

This relationship between wholesalers and fresh fruit and vegetables shows that quality is not a matter of generalisations, since every wholesaler handles his or her concept in a different way, according to their own experience and knowledge. However, wholesalers also associate quality with conditions of supply and demand. If supply is low of essential products, such as tomatoes,

which are not easy to substitute for other fresh produce, quality will not be a priority. In order to satisfy their own customers, wholesalers buy directly from colleagues.

As shown in Chapter 7, in shortage days the wholesalers reserve the best quality for their favourite buyers. According to one of the wholesalers interviewed, quality means that the customer will come again to buy his products here. Then, they can negotiate prices (Interview 80). Quality and service are important elements used by wholesalers and his vendors to win customers. The ability to achieve this goal is also linked to experience and a love of selling.

Wholesalers sell in order to keep old buyers and win new ones. They use the following slogan: 'Buy now, pay later.' As Boissevain (1974: 159) explains with regard to social brokers, wholesalers operate with credit because they are interested in keeping the exchange channel open for later occasions. Nevertheless, these risk practices are not always successful (see Chapters 2 and 3). Consequently, wholesalers can go bankrupt. Wholesalers can win as well as lose a lot of money in the short term. They feel that wholesaling is like gambling. Thus, some of them are prone to gamble in casinos, card games or horse races.

This instability sometimes leads them to use their money in gambling games as part of their idiosyncrasy. As shown in Chapter 3, although some wholesalers have gone bankrupt, they are still in the business working as vendors. One of the people interviewed defines these wholesalers as dinosaurs (Interview 34B): 'Once the dinosaurs had eaten the forest and photosynthesis was reduced, they did not disappear, they became birds. So, probably most of the descendants of the old wholesale markets are still working. Wholesalers love this activity so much that it is difficult for them to decide to change it for something else.'

## Interactions between Wholesalers

The case-studies analysed above show how wholesalers operate with their multiple understandings, knowledge, experiences, and family histories, which, in turn, explain part of their heterogeneities as entrepreneurs. The diversity of goals among them should explain their difficulties to conform to a stronger and more certain trade union.

The wholesalers' trade union is called the Chamber of Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Wholesalers (C.O.MA.FRU.). The Chamber was created by the BACWM wholesalers as a non-profit organisation in 1997. Its members look for a common and pluralistic union among wholesalers in order to defend, co-ordinate, and protect their rights as wholesalers at the BACWM. However, most of the wholesalers do not identify themselves with this organisation, linking the Chamber to politicians who 'only want to make a career out of it without taking care about the real problems of wholesalers' (Interview 49).

The main goals of the C.O.MA.FRU. are to defend wholesalers' interests and improve the co-ordination of fresh fruit and vegetable distribution. By doing so, they intend to collaborate with 'public' spheres to settle the BACWM as a major wholesale market, reacting against the unequal competition with other wholesale markets within the Buenos Aires metropolitan area (see Chapter 5). On their website,[39] they claim that the fresh fruit and vegetable industry generates more than US$ 3,000 million a year and provides work either directly or indirectly to more than half a million workers. For them, it is necessary that the national government reframes the wholesale distribution system since they are the only wholesalers recognized by law. In addition, they demand from the BACWM authorities: knowledge about the fresh fruit and vegetable industry, as well as the ability and honesty to carry out the administration of the BACWM. Despite the Chamber's attempts to represent most wholesalers, only few of them participate actively.

The case-studies presented in this chapter are useful to understand why wholesalers are not interested in their union. Six of the seven wholesalers analysed are not part of the CO.MA.FRU. Most of them do not identify with the union itself or with the person in charge of the Directory (Viteri 2009). They only contact each other for particular matters. For instance, in order to satisfy customer demand, wholesalers buy directly from other wholesalers when they do not have a particular fresh fruit or vegetable (reselling produce inside the BACWM). According to the wholesalers interviewed, this is the only activity that joins them up.

Mr. F (Case-study 2), who is a member of the CO.MA.FRU., complains because nobody wants to participate in the meetings where they discuss rights, such as the cleanliness of the marketplace, for which they pay and which the BACWM Corporation does not control very well. He explains why many wholesalers, particularly the large ones, are not interested in participating in the Chamber the way they used to in the past:

> 'When he [referring to one of the most important wholesalers at the BACWM] was in the C.O.MA.FRU., he always wanted to be present at political and trade meetings. When he finished his mandate at the Chamber, he no longer came to our meetings. They [referring to the large wholesalers] receive political favours from influential people. They do business with the government. They export and import. That guy [referring to another large wholesaler who has his salesroom opposite his] has important political and economic leverage. He works with many 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 meet the supermarket's conditions of quality. They have to invest a lot of money'. (Interview 49C, 31 January 2007).

[39] http://www.almercadocentral.com.ar/comafru_qsomos.html (last visit June, 2009)

This wholesaler's statement shows how difficult relations between colleagues are. It seems that they are divided by feelings of jealousy about large wholesalers' abilities to increase their own social networks without the need of a formal union. Thus, C.O.MA.FRU.'s meetings are not part of wholesalers' interests, particularly of the medium and large ones. They do not have the same problems as small wholesalers. For instance, Mr. P (Case-study 6) considers that the fees they pay for the BACWM's stalls are very cheap since he manages to do good business. However, small wholesalers, like Mr. F, emphasise that large wholesalers do not participate in the Chamber since they can resolve their problems using their own political contacts. One of the wholesalers (Mr. Z, Case-study 7) said:

> 'There are wide divisions among us. We are like oil and vinegar. We cannot protect ourselves against external aggressions such as national rules or price control. Some wholesalers are envious, looking forward to seeing their neighbours' firms become bankrupt.' (Interview 19, 28 February 2007).

Although most of them demonstrate a lack of interest to participate in any union, they agree that it would be very useful to promote fresh fruit and vegetable consumption. The challenge here is to associate these heterogeneous wholesalers by means of a goal that could be interesting for everybody. Although wholesalers are related by fresh fruit and vegetables, this reciprocity of practices does not mean 'cohesion' or 'consensus' (cf. Giddens 1979: 76).

Besides the heterogeneous goals and interests among wholesalers, large wholesalers prefer to negotiate their own problems without passing them by the Chamber. Thus, policy-makers consider the institutional weakness of wholesalers to be an obstacle to negotiating norms and rules at the BACWM. Referring to the lack of wholesalers' representation, a politician states:

> 'In this country, institutionalism is very weak. Thus, fruit and vegetable wholesalers are a paradigmatic example. Most of the large wholesalers are not interested in being part of their own trade union. So, how can we resolve different conflicts of interests without a clear political position on behalf of the wholesalers? In addition, their Chamber's chairman has a police record for selling stolen fresh produce, and nowadays he doesn't have any stalls at the BACWM.' (Interview 66, 17 March 2007).

Following the same line of thought, the lawyer of the C.O.MA.FRU. pointed out that wholesalers are not connected to them. Thus, they are not in charge of the BACWM's administration (Interview 7). The incapacity of wholesalers to consolidate a trade union leads them to blame authorities at the BACWM or at the national level for doing nothing to improve fresh fruit and vegetable distribution. A wholesaler points out:

> 'The people at the Corporation want to close early on a Friday. What do I do with the merchandise? We don't really have someone who represents us. Do you know the chairman of C.O.MA.FRU.? His

> name is… I prefer not to tell you what I think. Politicians work only for themselves' (Interview L01-14, 15 December 2006).

The distrustful relations among wholesalers and the lack of interest in belonging to a union disable them to construct a consolidated Chamber in order to negotiate formally with the different actors involved at the fresh produce distribution.

## Conclusions

By analysing the life histories of seven wholesalers working at the BACWM, this chapter attempted to understand how they bridge the gap in communication and information between growers and consumers (cf. Boissevain 1974). The heterogeneity of wholesalers' origins, personalities and abilities explains their multiple practices and strategies to face changes. Through wholesalers' biographies it was possible to analyse the historical changes in fresh produce distribution (cf. Arce 1993a).

The seven cases selected illustrate the diverse origins of the wholesalers. They started working as wholesalers with their own background, which varies from *'cartonero'* or milkman to immigrant producer or fruit exporter. They learnt how to be wholesalers by experience and a love for the job. Their beginnings are linked to kinship and close national relationships. Although passing knowledge and experience from one generation to the next can operate as 'springboards' to improve the professional career of its members, Mr. P (Case-study 6) showed his own management abilities and skills to transform his family firm completely (cf. Leeds 1964, Long 2001b).

The kinds of products selected by wholesalers form another source of heterogeneous strategies. While small wholesalers prefer supplying vegetables, medium-size entrepreneurs combine fruit and vegetables to increase their sales volume. By doing so, they avoid depending on only a few fresh products. This increases their chances of surviving in a competitive environment (cf. Fligstein 1996). However, large companies focus on a particular group of products. This is related to the development of their own brand and knowledge. These diverse strategies are linked to learning by experience, constructing networks and investing in facilities, primary production, logistics and brands. They strive to sell not only fresh fruit and vegetables but also their 'brand-name', offering good service and quality to their suppliers and buyers (Geertz 1963).

The seven wholesalers studied show diverse ways to face challenge at the BACWM. They have changed their way of supplying according to their main buyers' demands. Among the small and small–medium-size wholesalers, only Mr. F (Case-study 2) ventured to sell products to supermarkets during the 1980s. However, he was not able to continue supplying them when they started demanding higher quality and logistics. In this sense, medium and large wholesalers demonstrated their ability to go on supplying supermarkets. They did so by investing in logistics, primary production and social networks.

This implied new ventures and new phases in their careers (cf. Long 2001b). Their ability to negotiate with growers in order to engage them in their new ventures deserves particular interest. This experience is also illustrated by the case study of Mr. S (see also Chapter 6).

Wholesalers' abilities to construct networks with suppliers and customers show that their functions go beyond the circulation of fresh produce and money. They also exchange favours, information, friendship and knowledge between buyers, suppliers and wholesalers (cf. Akerlof 1970, Cohen and Comaroff 1976, Pons 1988).

These data collected from wholesalers' biographies have illustrated the different strategies followed by wholesalers according to the size of their businesses and the contextual location. The context of the wholesalers' actions demonstrates that their practices are built and negotiated by particular social actors at a particular time and place (Knorr-Cetina 1981b). Although wholesalers rely on personal relationships in a passionate way, using old codes such as an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth, they do not end business relationships easily when these exchanges are still give profitable. Thus, it is important to know the wholesalers' life-worlds, not only in terms of the economic aspects but with regard to their own feelings about their activities at the BACWM.

# 5 The Buenos Aires Central Wholesale Market as an Emergent Property of Social Interactions

## Introduction

As shown in Chapters 2 and 3, heterogeneous groups of people operate with different aims at the BACWM Corporation. Since it is a hierarchical organisation, the Corporation administers the operations and interactions that take place at this market through a body of three chairmen and 450 administrative employees (civil servants). This organisation carries out the co-ordination according to 'modern procedures' of fresh fruit and vegetable management. However, approximately 500 wholesalers are constantly trying to develop their own strategies and maintain practices to pursue their own commercial and individual interests. These social practices generate countertendencies that will be analysed further.

This chapter will illustrate organisation issues by taking into account norms and regulations implemented by the hierarchy and informal networks created

by wholesalers (cf. Thompson et al. 1991: 14). The interface between the hierarchical organisation and practices performed by wholesalers creates emergent properties (Arce 1993a, Arce and Long 2000b, Handelman 2006, Long 1989) that reshape the BACWM's social life. These social practices show actors' abilities to negotiate conflicts and implement a particular order in the marketplace. In this chapter, corruption[40] is seen and represented as a social practice that blurs the division between the so-called 'public' and 'private' spheres (cf. Dewey 1954, Granovetter 2004, Weintraub 1997). This chapter uses participant observation and interviews as its main source and is ordered as follows.

The first part examines the co-ordination process from the point of view of the market's hierarchical organisation. The second part describes and analyses some interactions between wholesalers, civil servants and chairmen, taking into account the social actors' discourses (Foucault 1972, Long 2001a). Finally, the conclusion will argue that practices developed between actors at the BACWM tend to dissolve the clear division between 'public' and 'private' spheres. According to some social actors' statements, BACWM's hierarchical organisation does not work. Thus, the chain of command is under constant conflict and negotiation. In short, tensions rising from the clash between a hierarchical type of co-ordination and the wholesalers' everyday counterworks result in a complex dynamics in which BACWM's social life configures an emergent attribute.

## Corporation Chairmen and Civil Servants: The Hierarchical Coordination

There are three chairmen in the Corporation. They represent, respectively, national, provincial and municipal governments and they are in charge of the BACWM Corporation's administration. Civil servants are employees of the Corporation, and their role is to put into practices national norms and rules according to chairmen's decisions. Wholesalers (stall tenants) must contact the Corporation to pay for facilities and services such as cleaning, light and gas. Interactions within this multiple and heterogeneous group of individuals generate a complex course of action. Employees at the Corporation are responsible for providing services and making wholesalers comply with regulations. This exchange of services is not developed harmoniously, resulting in multiple ways in which fresh fruit and vegetable distribution is carried out within the BACWM Corporation.

The hierarchical organisation tries to co-ordinate relationships through the institutionalisation of social interactions based on friendship, partnership or kinship. This co-ordination engenders social reactions. Thus, everyone from

[40] According to the Oxford English Dictionary, corruption is a perversion or destruction of integrity in the discharge of public duties by bribery or favour. In this definition, the element 'public' duties limits the concept to individuals acting on behalf of the public, such as government officials.

wholesalers to porters complains about problems in the BACWM Corporation. They consider that many of these problems are linked to competitors and BACWM's bad administration. Some of the wholesalers interviewed say:

> 'This marketplace is already in crisis. In future, there will only be warehouses supplying supermarkets in this place. It was completely different in the 1990s. You couldn't walk easily through this corridor because there were a lot of customers looking for fresh fruit and vegetables. I miss the rush hours of those times, where we used to sell much more than nowadays' (Interview 12-53, December 2006).

> 'This marketplace needs more well-mannered people. It is impossible to think of this place as a logistics centre when people [operating it] have not even finished primary school. The administration of this market is another disaster' (Interview 12-53, December 2006).

> 'The decrease in sales volume at this marketplace is due to the other 200 wholesale markets [indeed approximately 20] that are operating in the metropolitan area. In here, you have to pay a very high rent for the stall and you are controlled by the administration' (Interview 7-34, December 2006).

According to some wholesalers (Interviews 7-39, L3-8, L6-31, L1-14), the cause of the deterioration of the BACWM is linked to bad management and unfair competition by small wholesale markets spread around the Buenos Aires metropolitan area. However, other BACWM's users (Interviews L2-14, 29, 43, 72) argue that these small marketplaces do not represent a huge competition since they do not sell large amount of products. Some of the wholesalers interviewed say:

> 'The other wholesale markets have their own limitations. They cannot sell as many products as we do here. We move more than 1,500 boxes a day, and those markets don't have large buyers like we do. Besides, we are open from 4 am to 3 pm and they sell only three hours a day' (Interview L2-14, December 2006).

> 'This marketplace was regulated to be the only legal place for fresh fruit and vegetable wholesale. This legal situation changed in 1992 and nowadays more than 20 wholesaling alternatives coexist alongside the BACWM. The problem is that the only marketplace with a legal address is the BACWM. This means that we are the only wholesalers controlled by the General Tax Office. Thus, I think that policy-makers should legalise the other alternatives' (Interview 62, 5 May 2007).

This point of view bears a contradiction. While wholesalers ask authorities for a legal framework, they look for freedom to conduct their own businesses. This contradictory demand from wholesalers to policy-makers complicates their relationship. From the wholesalers' discourses, it seems that they

wouldn't mind the legal framework if only everybody would be covered by the law. However, wholesalers' practices show that they appreciate other types of organising. While wholesalers are constructing horizontal, voluntary and circumstantial social practices based on their own experiences, policy-makers attempt to control these practices in a hierarchical way, establishing different ways of co-ordination within the same marketplace (cf. Thompson et al. 1991). This situation tends to bring tension and instability, reflected in the everyday practices at the BACWM.

Chairmen, civil servants and wholesalers are always arguing about how the BACWM is administered. Since the more visible part of this organisation is its hierarchy, chairmen of the Corporation are the more identifiable target of critique of everybody at the BACWM. Both the wholesalers and civil servants interviewed explained that every time a chairman takes office as part of the Corporation's hierarchical organisation, his first task is to start building alliances with civil servants and wholesalers in order to govern the market through the existing differences and conflicts of interests. The chairmen's need for formal and informal contacts is linked to their limited knowledge of the horticultural industry.

The importance given to the chairmen's functions by different social actors at the BACWM required particular attention in this research. Thus, after five months of fieldwork, one chairman was finally interviewed. It took such a long time because, on the one hand, many civil servants at the BACWM argue that there is no sense in contacting any of the three chairmen of the market. According to them, chairmen know nothing about fresh fruit and vegetable distribution and ignore everyday life at the BACWM. On the other hand, I had started to hold my own prejudices after listening to different controversial opinions about these policy-makers and their effect on wholesalers' activities, porters and civil servants. However, a few civil servants and wholesalers consider that the chairman who granted the interview in particular is interested in the BACWM.

After a two-hour wait for the appointment, the chairman explained his position, highlighting the difficulties of implementing public regulations and a public control system for fresh fruit and vegetable commercialisation:

> 'I have a rather pessimistic vision of the BACWM Corporation's role to date. This marketplace was created as an instrument of public regulation and intervention in order to organise food security and supply. The idea started during Perón's Second Administration [Second Presidency, 1952–1958]. But there was a time-lag between its conception and its start-up (1984). Consequently, the BACWM Corporation as an instrument of public regulation made no sense in the context of neo-liberal policies (1976–present). Everything changed, except the BACWM.'
>
> 'However, I tried to modify the National Act 19227/1972 and presented a new project to national authorities in 2002. The project attempted to create a national network of wholesale

> markets. Therefore, we needed help from the national government since the project implied having a registry of growers and formal produce control. But the lack of cohesion between the three powers at the BACWM and the lack of national policy have prevented us from setting up this network. At least, the National Agrifood Health and Quality Service (SE.NA.SA.) has implemented the fresh fruit and vegetable production and distribution control system (SI.CO.F.HOR.) as of 2001' (Interview 11, 11 March 2007).

According to the chairman, it is very difficult to improve the marketplace without a proper legal framework. It would seem that the chairmen's capacity to improve the administration of this marketplace depends on the national political context rather than on their ability to manage the BACWM Corporation. In addition, the lack of a legal framework restricts their management and the legitimacy of their interventions.

This chairman's statement reveals his historical association with state and non-state actors (cf. Rose-Redwood 2006). He positions himself as a Peronist and anti-liberal, attempting to define and control rules in fresh fruit and vegetable distribution. However, he is limited to do so due to the lack of political cohesion both at the BACWM and at the national level. He also has to co-ordinate the BACWM Corporation with other actors, such as civil servants and wholesalers. Apart from the daily experiences with these social actors, chairmen have to deal with the historical sedimentation of how power is implemented and resisted by this heterogeneous group of people. In summary, the legal framework is part and parcel of the everyday practices at the BACWM, since some of these laws/acts were created to regulate wholesaling and to control quality and the sanitary conditions of fresh fruit and vegetable distribution. This is linked with the historical conflict between policy-makers and wholesalers since the creation of the BACWM (1984).

According to the chairman interviewed, it is also necessary to combine 'public' and 'private' elements when running the BACWM. Therefore, he must deal with other policy-makers, civil servants and the world of wholesalers (porters, vendors, employees, etc.). He pointed out the difficulties and tensions involved in his dealings with them. To him, wholesalers do not constitute a recognisable collective body and are extremely proud of their own autonomy and independence (see Chapter 4). He explains:

> 'In my opinion, the BACWM is a private business that needs to be regulated by public norms. Then, it doesn't matter whether it is managed by public or private actors, but it does matter that it is managed efficiently. This means that the BACWM Corporation's managers have to know about public administration rather than fresh fruit and vegetable distribution. Wholesalers use the BACWM because it suits them, but none of them are interested in improving the fresh fruit and vegetable industry. They only claim for security and a reduction in the stalls' rent. If they want to talk to me, it is only for personal matters such as being granted an authorisation to install a cold chamber' (Interview 11, 13 March 2007).

According to this chairman, the lack of a strong wholesalers' union or association makes any interaction with them difficult. It would seem that the interactions between chairmen and wholesalers are, by definition, incapable of producing any lasting agreements. Wholesalers' own trouble in organising themselves into a union (see Chapter 4) prevents them from building formal interactions between the formal hierarchy and wholesalers. In addition, each chairman has to share his position with two other chairmen at the Corporation. This limits each chairman's capacity to modify or adapt the existing rules and norms. Despite these inherited disadvantages, it seems that other elements contribute to the creation of a weak hierarchical organisation. A civil servant, referring to the chairman interviewed, said:

> 'He was one of the most ominous chairmen the BACWM ever had in its whole history. He never signed any official resolution that could make him responsible for changes. For instance, he closed the BACWM with barbed wire to avoid robbery, but the only thing we achieved was an increase in the heterogeneity of pavilions (Chapter 3). Next, we had to face his bad decisions and listen to wholesalers complaining. I would like to see one of these chairmen ends up like Mussolini, hanging in a square. I cannot believe that someone else could say he was good manager. Probably, he or she did good business with him.' (Interview 37d, 6 March 2007).

This passionate verbal attack on the authorities by a civil servant shows the particular characteristics of Argentineans' relationships with their national government. In this case, the level of passion is higher since this civil servant considered himself directly affected by chairmen's political decisions. On the other hand, the BACWM's chairmen are considered inefficient in different ways. Civil servants believe that most of the chairmen were not able to improve facilities or services, such as cleanliness, security and operating hours. Both wholesalers and civil servants argue that chairmen fill a position at the Corporation as a result of political favours rather than technical capacity. Nevertheless, they agree that the lack of national policies regarding the fresh fruit and vegetable industry is an important obstacle to these managers (Interviews 1, 10, 34, 66, 75).

During my fieldwork, the only chairman renowned to both wholesalers and civil servants was Mr. Luis Abelardo Patti. Most employees at the BACWM agree with wholesalers that Mr. Patti is a symbol of order, somebody who worked honestly. The President, Mr. Carlos Menem (1989–1999) entrusted him with auditing the Corporation from 1993 to 1995 as a result of some irregularities in its administration. Consequently, Mr. Patti was an auditor who did not share the power of the Corporation's administration with the other chairmen. According to the wholesalers interviewed, Mr. Patti led the BACWM Corporation honestly, through order and discipline:

> 'The only good chairman I knew was Patti. When he was in charge of the Administration, I needed an authorisation to install a cold

> chamber and he responded to me immediately. Regardless of his past,[41] to me he was the best manager we had till now. Patti walked the transactional area every day. So, he knew our problems' (Interview 72, 7 March 2008).
>
> 'The only time in which this marketplace worked well was with Patti in 1993. He received the BACWM administration with a debt of US$ 4.5 million and left the administration with a surplus of US$ 8 million. During his ´chairmanship´, bathrooms were clean, there was no rubbish, there were no bribes, and lazy employees were fired. Ask around and you will find that nowadays there are three managers who cannot keep this place in order' (Interview 8-37, 20 December 2006).

In spite of Mr. Luis Abelardo Patti's controversial past, everybody agrees that he improved the image of order and cleanliness at the BACWM and did not steal money from the Corporation. He showed how to discipline the BACWM by painting the marketplace and giving colourful uniforms to employees in order to visualise them easily. In addition, he had a yellow line painted to separate commercial stalls from the buyer corridor in order to create space for the circulation of trolleys and buyers. This action brought order to the public sphere and established symbols (like the yellow line or uniforms) that even nowadays are mentioned by wholesalers. Nevertheless, this order must not to be confused with an efficient co-ordination of fresh fruit and vegetable distribution.

Mr. Patti dismissed employees and eliminated some privileges (official cars and mobile phones) from high-ranked employees. His ability to cut some privileges off was celebrated by low-rank employees and wholesalers. This shows the existence of competitive and conflictive relationships among civil servants and with regard to the wholesalers' generalised idea that civil servants receive a salary for doing nothing. In addition, wholesalers and civil servants agree that Patti's administration achieved a clean, bribe-, prostitution- and drug-free BACWM. The emphasis on cleanliness could be linked to the need of wholesalers to show another face of the wholesaling environment, which seems to always be related to illegal activities.

These measures made Mr. Luis Patti the only good exception to many wholesalers who still have bad opinions about the Corporation and its organisation as a 'public' entity. It seems that Mr. Patti attained control at the BACWM by positioning himself as an 'obligatory point of passage' (Callon 1986) for the hierarchy and network organisations. Nevertheless, some civil servants refer to Mr. Patti's management style as follows:

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[41] Luis Abelardo Patti is known for his illegal and torture activities at the Buenos Aires Police Force during the 1970s. He was accused of killings and kidnappings. Despite many allegations, Patti was found not guilty by the jury. However, he could not stand as a member of National Parliament because of his criminal records (CELS 1999) (http://www.paufe.org.ar/art/209).

> 'Patti wanted to gain a political position. So, he carried out a transparent management. He achieved surplus in the Corporation's balance sheet. He used to live here, walk and talk with wholesalers. I can't say he didn't work well. On behalf of the state's duties, I asked him to buy new equipment for the laboratory and he did. I think that was the only large investment that we made when he was here'.
>
> 'As a good military, he made employees paint the BACWM, even the yellow line that sets aside the corridor from the stalls at the pavilions. It was only during his ´chairmanship´ that the BACWM was clean. Of course, he employed cop methods to put the marketplace in order. Every employee had to wear an orange uniform, in order to be controlled easily. Women became angry with this military control system' (Interview 31a, 10 April 2007).
>
> 'In my strictly personal opinion, it is not true that Patti's time as an auditor was the only good administration at the BACWM. Angelucci, for instance, was honest but I think it is easier for an auditor than for a tripartite government, since Patti didn't have to deal with two other politicians. Nevertheless, Patti managed the cleanliness and organisation of the BACWM so well due to his army background; he also accomplished a transparent administration' (Interview 66, 17 March 2007).

These civil servants agree that Patti's management style was authoritarian and included elements of surveillance such as the employees' orange uniforms and the yellow line. It seems that the social actors involved at the BACWM consider that wholesale markets can be well administrated by using military methods. An expert interviewed said: 'during the military administration, chairmen used to govern at gunpoint' (Interview 15). So, should the BACWM be a place of surveillance? Or is there space for counter-tendencies? This is linked to the hierarchy's ways of intervening in this social space. By taking into account the opinion of the different social actors involved in this social space, the aim of the following section is to understand how social interactions generate different ways of co-ordinating between civil servants and wholesalers at the BACWM.

## Different Interests and Conflicts: Interactions between Wholesalers, Civil Servants and Chairmen

The social actors interviewed at the BACWM define themselves as 'public' and 'private' actors. This antagonistic classification can be traced back to the creation of this marketplace. As mentioned in Chapter 2, wholesalers were forced to move from their old stalls to the new BACWM in 1984. This situation generated counter-tendencies, involving serious disagreements between wholesalers and administrators. Wholesalers were always eager to conduct

their businesses freely, and policy-makers attempted to control them and improve wholesaling activities through rules and norms.

Although the social actors interviewed at the BACWM define the sphere of the administration as 'public' and the transaction area as 'private', these antagonistic spheres come in contact in their everyday practices and it is difficult to separate them. Nevertheless, 'public' actors (civil servants, chairmen) are always derided by 'private' actors (wholesalers, vendors, or porters) for their inefficiencies and lack of initiative (cf. Thompson et al. 1991). The following sections attempt to describe and understand these complex relationships through social actors' discourses. In this research, discourses are considered as social practices since actors manipulate and transform their own discourses according to particular circumstances (Foucault 1972, Long 2001a). By unravelling social actors' discourses in the different conflict arenas at the BACWM, it is possible to understand how they give meaning to their own conflicts.

## Social Interactions Transgressing Boundaries between 'Public' and 'Private'

In order to know the main arguments of wholesalers and civil servants about the BACWM and its organisation, I started my fieldwork interviewing some of these social actors. The wholesalers interviewed pointed out different aspects of the administrative sector, while stressing management and political issues. Smaller-sized wholesalers complained the most, saying they pay a lot of money for the rent of stalls at the marketplace but obtain little service from the Corporation in return. Some of them explain:

> 'The relation with the BACWM's administration is not good. They are not technicians, they are politicians. They do not know anything about fresh fruit and vegetables' (Interview 5-13, 5 December 2006).

> 'The BACWM's administration does not defend us, they are against us. We employ 10,000 people and also support its 5,000 employees [indeed there are 450]' (Interview 5-25, 5 December 2006).

These comments reflect the various ideas that wholesalers have about the task of civil servants and chairmen at the BACWM. They do not feel in any way responsible for the bad administration, but they do argue that employees at the administration should work more efficiently. Moreover, they emphasise that the 'public' sphere, particularly the chairmen, is not interested in the horticultural industry and, in addition, is absolutely 'unaware' of fresh fruit and vegetable distribution. In the wholesalers' opinion, 'public' employees are inefficient and incompetent. Wholesalers exchange symbols of disapproval for the way in which the administration is organised. It seems that the Corporation's three chairmen are not able to gain consensus according to the wholesalers and civil servants. Two of the wholesalers interviewed, express their discontent as follows:

> 'The administration is like a hunting ground for the three political powers: nation, province and municipality. That is why the 500 employees at the Corporation do not know what they have to do in there or maybe they do know: they collect their salaries every month' (Interview 29, 26 December 2006).

'The BACWM is like the country; its employees are in the Corporation's offices chatting, listening to the radio or drinking maté [traditional infusion]. Nobody comes to the transaction area. Even more so, the administration appoints other people to do tasks like cleaning rather than make its employees do the work. Thus, I think that the BACWM Corporation is a dangerous political conglomerate' (Interview 72, 7 March 2008).

The above opinions are part of the heterogeneous discourses that wholesalers use to explain their relationships with chairmen and civil servants. While small wholesalers argue, for instance, that the rent of the stalls is very high, large wholesalers emphasise their capacity to do business in spite of the bad service offered by the market's 'public' administration (see also Chapter 4). Beyond the administrative tasks, both small and large wholesalers consider the 'public' sphere corrupt. Wholesalers always remark that they are the efficient part of this marketplace, while chairmen and civil servants are not. However, as a rule, wholesalers admit that they are not 'saints'. Thus, some of them have a less disapproving outlook on 'public' practices, suggesting that 'there are honest people among the civil servants' (Interview 18a). For instance, when asked about corruption charges against the 'public' administration, one of the civil servants in charge of sanitary and quality control at the laboratory said:

> 'A bribe can pass around only if two parts agree. So, wholesalers tell half of the truth. I am proud of myself since everybody knows me as the 'petisa' [i.e. short in size] who no one can bribe. When a test shows bad results of quality control at the laboratory, wholesalers have the right to request a second analysis. More than once have I received visits from wholesalers' lawyers who asked me to fix it up in another way. But I have never agreed to it' (Interview 31a, 10 April 2007).

This comment indicates that favours and briberies are common elements of the social interactions at this marketplace. Nevertheless, chairmen and civil servants refer more frequently to their existence than wholesalers. While wholesalers refer to 'public' employees as corrupt, they do not explain this behaviour by using examples the way civil servants do. This omission reinforces the idea that corruption is a destruction of the 'public' integrity. However, it seems that social actors are constantly crossing the boundaries between 'public' and 'private' fields of power. Consequently, corruption can be a common behaviour adopted by actors in order to construct their own field of action at the BACWM. Briberies and favours are part of the interactions between these social actors who use power in order to take advantage of a particular situation. If the relationship is initiated by a 'private' citizen it is bribery; and if civil servants or policy-makers have the

initiative it is extortion. But this distinction is difficult to make in practice (Granovetter 2004) since both wholesalers and chairmen or civil servants deny being involved in such dealings. Despite social actors' discourses, their interactions create social spaces where the 'public' and the 'private' are blended. Although it is difficult to find bribery or extortion within these complex interactions between social actors at the BACWM, the following section will attempt to understand how gossip about briberies and favours circulates among wholesalers and civil servants.

## Circulation of Gossip and the Visibility of Conflicts

This section explains different experiences of corruption linked to chairmen, civil servants and wholesalers' activities, showing conflicts of interests not only between spheres but also within each one. The circulation of briberies, favours or punishments shows different styles of management, conflicts among civil servants and diverse interaction modes between wholesalers and civil servants. These interactions are part of the BACWM's social life.

One of the chairmen attributes the bad management to the corruption of one of his colleagues and some wholesalers. 'This is how this country works. In Argentina, it seems that norms enslave you, when it should be the opposite,' he says (Interview 11). Among the corruption gossip flooding the BACWM, the most renowned bits are linked to 330 hectares reserved for future investments in storage facilities. According to the chairman interviewed, projects involving the use of these hectares confuse BACWM's role as the main reference point of fresh fruit and vegetable distribution. These projects are linked to contracts between the Corporation and different multinational food, beverage and retailing companies interested in setting up part of their logistic and distribution centres at this marketplace. The Master Plan, which was a bidding granted to international experts for the construction of a food distribution centre in 2000, is a paradigmatic example of these interactions, where, again, 'public' and 'private' spheres are blurred. According to some interviewees (Interviews 2, 37, 63), this investment was not carried out because the bidding was full of irregularities of both 'public' and 'private' actors. Although 'public' employees admit the existence of bribery, they always deny being involved for private purposes.

Interactions between civil servants and wholesalers and within each group are full of gossip exchanges. Based on the opinion of each other, it is easy to understand that there are conflicts between them. For instance, a group of civil servants criticises colleagues who attend 'private' parties offered by wholesalers, considering that 'civil servants' cannot be friends with wholesalers since they have to regulate the commercial activities. However, employees who interact with wholesalers in a friendly manner consider their colleagues' opinions obsolete. In addition, these civil servants behave differently in their interaction with chairmen. This situation can be summed up by one of the civil servants:

> 'I had problems with one of the Corporation's chairmen last year. I guess that my job and the way I go about it presented an obstacle to him. I was in charge of the bidding of stalls' rentals. This auction can be either transparent or an obscure arrangement between a particular chairman and a wholesaler. Since I wanted to increase the Corporation's revenue by using legal procedures, I had problems with this chairman. Seeing that he was not able to strike any deals without my confidence, he put me out of my daily activities. But it is cyclical. It depends on the chairman's political orientation. However, I think that the BACWM became a real estate business. Therefore, we need to have good relationships with wholesalers who pay the rent. Of course, it does not mean that we have to do this in an illegal way' (Interview 4, 4 May 2007).

Regardless of the employee's honest or dishonest behaviour, his comment illustrates other elements in the interactions between civil servants and chairmen. According to his remarks, civil servants must obey orders from chairmen as part of the hierarchical organisation at the BACWM. Despite civil servants' agreements or disagreements, they say that they have to work for the 'crown' (alluding to the chairmen's private business). This means that civil servants consider that most of the chairmen's private interests prevail over the general interests of improving fresh fruit and vegetable commercialisation. As a result, civil servants always consider themselves to be in a weak position when facing contradictions between chairmen and wholesalers' interests.

Despite his speech of honesty, it seems that this civil servant is not in such a weak position as he pointed out. According to his colleagues, he is the most 'tránsfuga' (disloyal) employee at the Corporation. He is accused of keeping rent money to himself, using his friendly association with other chairmen and wholesalers. One of his colleagues calls him 'Pico de Loro' (parrot beak), implying that he talks too much but says nothing. These constant disagreements and rumours among civil servants explain multiple ways of fulfilling their role at the BACWM. One can be a corrupt, dishonest, or honest employee, but never a 'passive' civil servant in this marketplace.

Interactions between civil servants and wholesalers show other aspects of BACWM's social life. These actors are brought together by different activities, such as renting stalls, repairing facilities, surveying prices and controlling quality. The last one is one of the most sensitive tasks since wholesalers must stop selling if their products are selected by inspectors in order to be controlled in the laboratory (see Chapter 3). Nevertheless, some are powerful enough to avoid quality and sanitary controls. It seems that some wholesalers have the ability to avoid controls by using their 'friendly' connections with chairmen or civil servants. One of the civil servants, who works as a quality inspector, explains:

> 'Mr. R is a wholesaler with a lot of power within the Corporation. Since my quality control of his fresh produce and warehouses bothered him, he entrusted one of his employees, rather than his

> front man, to stop me. He is devious, greets me very friendly-like, but behind my back he arranged for my dismissal with other wholesalers at his pavilion, accusing me of harassing my colleagues. Thus, the authorities decided to demote me. Mr. R has a lot of political influences and I am a simple civil servant trying to do my best' (Interview 35, 13 March 2007).

The wholesaler accused by this employee was also interviewed. He explained his relationship with the administration as follows:

> 'Our contacts with the BACWM's administrators have had their good and bad moments. It has been reciprocal. They [referring to the Corporation's chairmen] usually come to the trading room. They come to visit me and my colleagues. Some people like gossiping about the chairmen not working. But I think that we [Argentineans] must improve our political education. We have undergone too many dictatorships and military coups… It is not only the politicians´ fault' (Interview 19, 28 February 2007).

This wholesaler's comment shows part of the power that large wholesalers can achieve through their friendly relationships with chairmen and other politicians at the national level. His statement denotes an ambiguous differentiation between 'public' and 'private' spheres since favours are exchanged between them. The creation of partner relations between chairmen and wholesalers puts aside the role of civil servants as employees trying to enforce national norms and rules.

This wholesaler's behaviour is a clear example of heterogeneity in the pattern of relationships between civil servants, chairmen and wholesalers. On the one hand, some large wholesalers use their own connections in order to manipulate norms and orders to their personal and commercial convenience without attempting to create a strong union. On the other hand, and in spite of their weak level of institutionalisation, few small wholesalers strive to consolidate their union in order to face political interventions at the BACWM. The heterogeneous actions and interactions between wholesalers, civil servants and chairmen show conflicts of interest among wholesalers who have different purposes according to the size of their businesses and connections. Although some wholesalers argue that they have not been able to organise themselves in a strong organisation, a few are enthusiastic about exchanging ideas and projects to improve the marketplace. However, they act as individuals and make no effort to be involved in a wholesalers' union.

Gossip circulation shows visible conflicts developed at the social interface between different and heterogeneous social actors in the BACWM. These interactions entwine a world of social actors who operate beyond this physical marketplace, such as in small wholesale markets in the Buenos Aires metropolitan area. The following section presents an interesting case showing that these conflictive interactions go beyond face-to-face relationships.

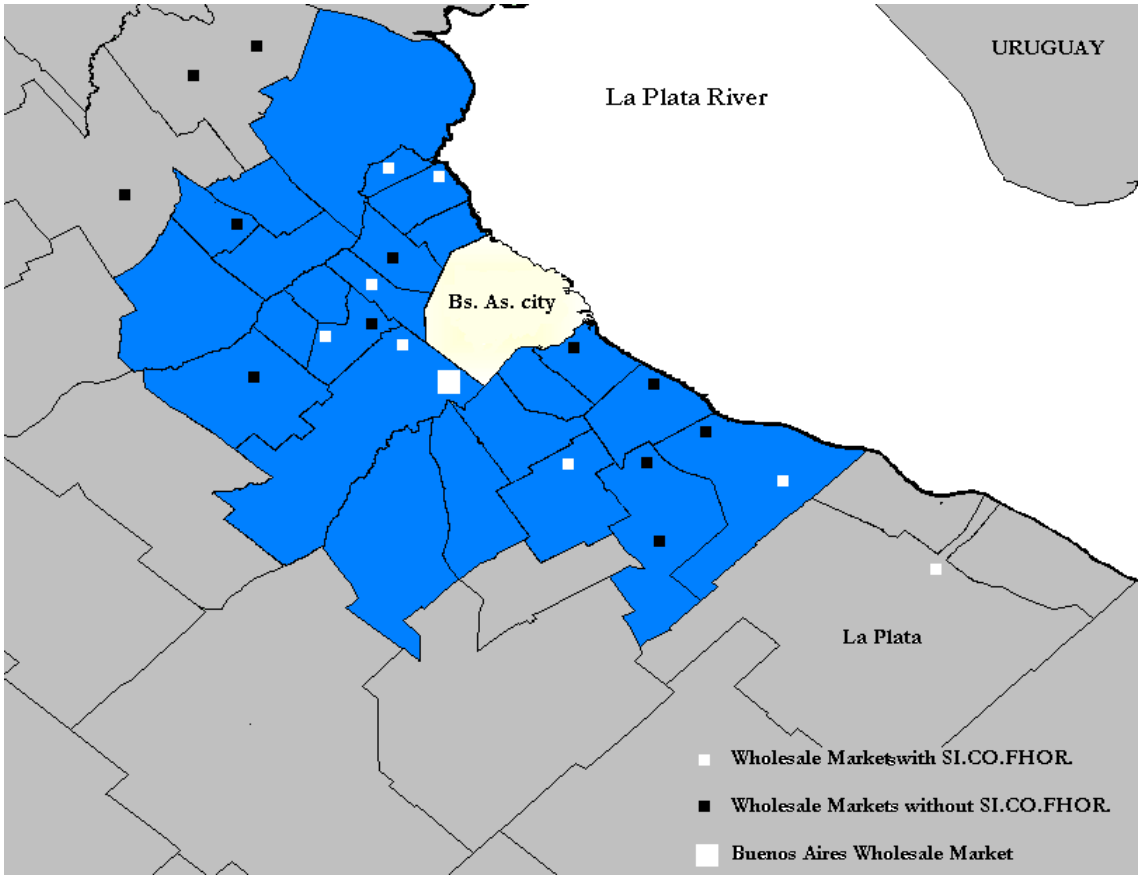
## Small Wholesale Markets at the Buenos Aires Metropolitan Area

The creation of the BACWM implied legal protection prohibiting fresh fruit and vegetable wholesaling in Buenos Aires city and in 26 other municipalities (19227/72 National Markets of Interest). Nevertheless, social practices and new regulations (National Decree Nº 2284/91) allowed other wholesale markets to operate within this protected perimeter. In order to even out conditions in fresh fruit and vegetable distribution, the national government has been attempted to regulate these activities. Hence, the National Agrifood Health and Quality Service (SE.NA.SA. 240/2003 and 513/2004) has been trying to build a registry of marketplaces and warehouses in order to guarantee sanitary and quality conditions of fresh fruit and vegetable distribution since 2003. So far, 11 wholesale markets in the Buenos Aires metropolitan area and surroundings have registered with SE.NA.SA. By doing so, they are part of the fresh fruit and vegetable production and distribution control system (SI.CO.F.HOR.), and thus comply with sanitary and quality norms.

According to interviews and secondary data, it was possible to identify 16 small wholesale marketplaces operating in the Buenos Aires metropolitan area. Nine of these are organised under the Argentine Wholesale Market Chamber.[42] In 2004, this Chamber and the BACWM Corporation signed a collaboration agreement in order to help these wholesale markets achieve national technical standards. Although available information is limited, Map 5.1 shows the 16 wholesale markets scattered around the Buenos Aires metropolitan area as well as other wholesale markets situated in the region. The ones shown in white fulfil national quality standards.

[42] This Chamber is constituted by 10 marketplaces: BACWM, Béccar, San Martín, San Fernando, José C. Paz, Almirante Brown, Quilmes, Bonaerense, La Matanza, and Círculo (Interview 32).

***Map 5.1: Geographical Locations of Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Wholesale Markets in the Metropolitan Area of Buenos Aires***




*Source: Viteri based on interviews*

Despite political efforts, most civil servants at the BACWM Corporation believe that many of these small markets are still working in unfavourable conditions. In addition, they are not secondary handler markets (see Chapter 2). So, most of the fresh produce offered at these markets by-passes BACWM's quality control. This challenges BACWM's role as a quality and price reference. Two different civil servants at the BACWM say:

> 'The BACWM has been decreasing its sales volume because of the indiscriminate opening of other wholesale markets. I do not think that we [referring to the BACWM] are better than the others nowadays. I heard from wholesalers that the other marketplaces have better quality of vegetables than we do. They open at night. We are becoming just one of the 20 wholesale markets. That is why it is important to us to regain our leading position in terms of quality and price. We need to attract growers. At the moment, small growers prefer the smaller marketplaces since there are no price controls' (Interview 37a, 5 December 2007).

> 'We used to have more quality control. The thing is we cannot be too strict when the other markets do not carry out any controls. Of course, the managers of the small markets say they do control, but they do not. Recently, the Corporation signed an agreement to collaborate with these other small wholesale marketplaces. I think that this happened because one of the BACWM Corporation's chairmen is part of a wholesale markets network' (Interview 31a, 10 April 2007).

These opinions strongly emphasise the primordial role of the BACWM. Hence, their complaints against the lack of a national regulation that can provide an even framework for all wholesaling. As mentioned before, according to the chairman interviewed, the BACWM lost its central role in the 1990s. 'During the implementation of the neo-liberal policy, the BACWM should have been privatised. This did not happen because of the wholesalers' lack of organisation,' he said.

The Decree $N^0$ 19227/1972 established a 60 kilometre perimeter of competitive protection for the BACWM. However, new and old marketplaces started operating within this perimeter immediately after BACWM's inauguration (1984). For instance, two marketplaces (Béccar and Tres de Febrero) were never integrated into the BACWM (see Chapter 2). This illegal situation became legal with Decree $N^0$ 2284/1991. The decree deregulated the fresh fruit and vegetable activities according to neo-liberal policy orientations. This explains the complexity of establishing a centralised wholesale market system in order to control fresh fruit and vegetable distribution. In addition to this intricate arrangement, some of the social actors interviewed mentioned that there are at least 200 illegal warehouses that are not registered and that work without any kind of regulations (Interviews 32, 33). Therefore, it comes as no surprise that the lack of a legal framework for fresh fruit and vegetable distribution is a constant source of debate among wholesalers. However, it is also the source from which stem multiple individual strategies and semi-legal activities.

Several of the wholesalers interviewed perceive the small wholesale markets and their irregular warehouses as unfair rivals to their commercial activities. Nevertheless, this is not so in practice. Less established wholesalers use the lack of a legal framework to create more businesses. For instance, medium-size fruit wholesalers diversify their activities by having a stall in some of these small marketplaces. In spite of this, the most established wholesalers use the existence of the other markets as an example of 'illegal' competition against them. Some of these established entrepreneurs say:

> 'There are many other wholesale markets around, but only BACWM's wholesalers have a legal address. This means that whenever the government must control something (prices, quality, or taxes) they will come to control us and not those who work in the shadows and employ illegal immigrants. But politicians do not want to talk about this. Indeed, nobody speaks about this. Even more, the National Institute of Statistics and Censuses (INDEC) does

> not survey those wholesale markets' (Interview 29, 26 December 2006).
>
> 'The BACWM is going to deteriorate due to disloyal competition. I have more costs here. I have to pay for everything. I have to invoice. As for these 'clandestine' marketplaces, nobody pays for anything there. Nobody pays for anything. So, a box of tomatoes is cheaper there than it is here. And since they work at night, the greengrocers go there first' (Interview 8-37, 20 December 2006).
>
> 'Here we have to be registered at the Internal Revenue Service (IRS). So, they can control me very easily. How do they control the other wholesalers outside of the BACWM? The law is not equal for everybody' (Interview 5-23, 5 December 2006).
>
> 'In the other small markets there are no controls, whereas here I have to pay income taxes. The national government knows this very well, but does nothing about it. At least 70% of our sales are under legal conditions' (Interview L03-02, 4 December 2006).

The issue of illegality is ambiguous since some wholesalers at the BACWM have acknowledged that they also work 'in the shadows' under certain circumstances. Despite this statement, they consider themselves more visible to national government's price and quality controls than wholesalers at small marketplaces. In other words, while the former use partially irregular mechanisms, the latter sell 100% of their produce under unregulated conditions.

In spite of national government's efforts to guarantee sanitary conditions for fresh fruit and vegetable distribution, BACWM's wholesalers believe that everything is unregulated. Moreover, they consider that the National Registry of Sanitary Identification implemented by the National Agrifood Health and Quality Service (SE.NA.SA.) is not working at all. These differences in wholesaler perception about the National Registry call attention to the gap between regulations and practices. One of the entrepreneurs at the BACWM states:

> 'It is important for us to work under a legal framework. Therefore, I have always supported the idea of a wholesale market network. This is crucial because we need to know the volume and origin of traded produce in order to have a degree of traceability. However, it seems that it is very difficult to put this into practice. I think that some policy-makers and wholesalers at the small markets aren't interested in this type of orderliness. They prefer an uncontrolled market. This poses a real problem because legalising fresh produce distribution implies controlling certain municipalities' practices. Everybody knows that these small wholesale markets are a source of municipalities' revenue, jobs and occupation for a significant number of people. Therefore, tidying up and organising fresh produce distribution could have a social and political cost that politicians are not able to afford' (Interview 62a, 4 May 2007).

On the one hand, it seems that some middle and large wholesalers at the BACWM do not mind sharing the distribution activities with other small marketplaces. This is significant since some of these wholesalers, particularly those who supply fruits, have commercial relations with users of the small wholesale markets. On the other hand, there is a reaction from BACWM's social actors against unfair competition. They argue that traders at the small marketplaces evade taxes and quality control, making more profits than they do. In spite of this, people at the BACWM appreciate the nature of working in a more legal context than the other small marketplaces. This provides wholesalers some kind of identity.

The constant objection to BACWM's organisation turns into a positive property when these social actors talk negatively about the small wholesale markets. This suggests that in spite of everything, the BACWM is tidier and has better technical conditions and facilities than the other marketplaces. Thus, they state that while a small marketplace commercialises an average of 40 tons a day, the BACWM sells 5,000 tons a day (Interview 32). Nevertheless, the insignificant volume per each individual wholesale market could become an important competition to the BACWM since these small wholesale markets have proliferated in the last five years. They may explain the degree of disconfirm between wholesalers at the BACWM and wholesalers at the small marketplaces.

The BACWM is also a place where wholesalers can portray themselves as efficient and serious distributors of fresh produce. This helps them develop new business opportunities. The benefit of this exposure is demonstrated below:

> 'We started at the BACWM this year as a shop window for supermarkets, but we already have stalls at other wholesale markets. We sell more quantity here than in the other small marketplaces. Besides, our customers are different over there. They cannot get here, to the BACWM, since they do not have good vehicles that can carry long distances. Besides, some of them do not have their paperwork in order [reference to the official permit to transport fresh fruit and vegetables]. Thus, we decided to open a stall at the BACWM. Now we cater for different kinds of buyers' (Interview L3-01, 14 December 2006).

Another wholesaler, who used to work at a marketplace in Mar del Plata, a summer holiday city in Buenos Aires province, says:

> 'I used to work at another wholesale market, but I decided to come here because you can sell throughout the year. Although the BACWM is also under crisis and I do not sell as much as I used to do five years ago. This marketplace offers me the opportunity to increase my image of a responsible wholesaler due to sanitary control' (Interview 12-53, 26 December 2006).

According to this information, it seems that the BACWM provides wholesale activities with a legal framework that other small markets cannot provide.

Another advantage is the larger volume handled by the BACWM in relation to the other marketplaces. Thus, major buyers prefer to procure fresh produce at the BACWM rather than from other suppliers. However, some wholesalers at the BACWM combine selling at more than one marketplace. This strategy allows them to increase their customers' portfolio. Most of BACWM's wholesalers agree on the need of a legal framework for these small marketplaces. This belief encompasses ambiguous feelings that fluctuate between the freedom that entrepreneurs want in order to grow in their business, and their desires for regulations to stop small market competition.

In other words, the national government's and wholesalers' discourses show a need for regulation in order to assure quality and healthy products to consumers. Nevertheless, this discourse is contradicted by practices observed by local politicians who support these small wholesale marketplaces. As shown above, BACWM's wholesalers are constantly interacting with this market network and some porters combine their jobs between the BACWM and other small marketplaces. Thus, these social practices show the overlap between wholesale markets beyond the unclear regulation framework.

## Public Intervention

This section attempts to explain the heterogeneous interactions developed by wholesalers, civil servants and chairmen. This will be illustrated by a situational analysis of a policy intervention at the BACWM in 2006 (Handelman 2006). The emphasis on a specific situation aims at going beyond the explanations of social actors, who act in terms of tacit knowledge and rules, without identifying these elements as components of their everyday practices (Knorr-Cetina 1981a). This event illustrates the capacity of social actors to face challenges and to generate counter-tendencies.

On behalf of the National Domestic Trade Department, Mr. Guillermo Moreno audited the BACWM in November 2006. The auditing did not entail the resignation of the three chairmen. Mr. Moreno's only goal was to achieve competitive prices for the fresh fruit and vegetables that belong to the official basic food basket.[43] The latter needed to be controlled and manipulated by the national government in order to control economic indicators presented to agencies such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF).

Mr. Moreno was assigned by the government to control prices at the BACWM. During his intervention, the prices presented on the BACWM's web site were modified to give an idea of price stability. In order to achieve this, the price survey focused on selected fresh fruit and vegetables without differentiation by quality or variety. Thus, this intervention caused different reactions among civil servants and wholesalers. Wholesalers' approach was to develop a variety

[43] The official basic food basket is correlated by the Consumer Price Index (CPI) developed by the National Institute of Statistics and Census (INDEC).

of counter-tendencies. It seems that wholesalers increased their own room for manoeuvre during this period. Sales 'in the shadows' became a generalised strategy used by wholesalers to avoid national price control. However, Mr. Moreno strived to establish different alliances with wholesalers through setting up numerous meetings with the Chamber of Fruit and Vegetable Wholesalers (CO.MA.FRU.) and talking with large wholesalers, who were discontent with this intervention.

During one of these meetings, CO.MA.FRU.'s members and Mr Moreno discussed possible economic losses caused by the imposition of official prices. Mr. Moreno asked wholesalers to make an effort and reduce the high price of lettuce. Since he was aware that growers would not be able to cover their production costs at the lowered official prices, he promised to compensate them. In addition, he shared their concerns about controlling prices in other commercial circuits such as the small wholesale markets in Buenos Aires metropolitan area. Thus, he asked wholesalers to provide him with names and locations of these marketplaces in order to achieve fair prices for everybody.

Although these meetings were open to all members of the Chamber, few wholesalers participated. As mentioned in Chapter 4, wholesalers are not interested in participating in CO.MA.FRU. Thus, Mr. F (a CO.MA.FRU. member and a small wholesaler) was very angry at his colleagues' absence from the meeting. He returned from the meeting feeling very tired and voiceless. When he started to work, four or five neighbours arrived at his stall asking him about Mr. Moreno's opinions and resolutions. Despite his poor health, he explained the meeting's content to them. Before he was finished, one of his colleagues (Mr. W, who is a wholesaler and a grower) started to complain (Field note 49h, 15 March 2007):

> Mr. W: 'Thank heavens I was not at the meeting. Moreno saying… that he wants us to earn money!… This is the greatest cock-and-bull story I have ever heard.'
>
> Mr. F: 'Moreno asked us to make him a list of the other wholesale markets since he is controlling only 11. Then, he considered that fresh produce has to be sold at a normal profit margin. He said that he will close the BACWM if the lettuce price is not reduced.'
>
> Mr. W: 'Why doesn't Moreno go to my market garden and check the number of lettuce boxes I can produce? He will compensate us for our economic losses, 'las pelotas' [bullshit/my arse] he will. I have no problem signing a contract like this with him right now, but he must help me when I get more than 500 lettuce boxes from my market garden and I can sell 50 at the BACWM, throwing away the other 450 boxes [referring to his potential economic losses and the impossibility to receive any official support from the national authorities].'

Although wholesalers showed apathy in taking part in Mr. Moreno's meeting, they were indeed interested in its outcome. Wholesalers like Mr. W, who also produce part of their supplies themselves, wanted to know how the national

government was going to resolve the conflict of maintaining low prices that directly affected their businesses.

This event shows how this intervention context caused interactions between different wholesalers beyond the official meetings at CO.MA.FRU. The outcome of each meeting was reproduced in every stall as illustrated above and large wholesalers had their own meeting with Mr. Moreno as can be seen from the following statement:

> 'I explained to Mr. Moreno that a marketplace needs rules in order to be part of the price reference system. Why would the national government want to control an economic activity like vegetables when nobody knows how many kilos are produced? I think that politicians believe that more than 80% of fresh fruit and vegetable distribution in the metropolitan area is concentrated in the BACWM, but we all know that this is not the truth. In my opinion, if the government controls prices only at the BACWM, it will make growers stop selling their vegetables to us. Then, when supply falls, price will go up' (Interview 62a, 4 May 2007).

According to this wholesaler, it would seem that large wholesalers give advice and exchange knowledge with politicians in order to manage political interventions and avoid high costs that could deteriorate their business. By doing so, they show policy-makers and politicians their capacity to control fresh fruit and vegetable distribution based on their experience and knowledge. Consequently, various meetings with Mr. Moreno showed the heterogeneous capacities available to face this national intervention. While small wholesalers prefer using their own informal channels of information, avoiding direct contacts with the auditor, it seems that some large wholesalers are interested in getting involved in political issues beyond their own business.

By taking into account the fresh fruit and vegetable distribution context at the moment of Mr. Moreno's intervention, it is possible to shed light on other aspects of its impact on the everyday life of wholesalers. As explained in Chapter 7, different factors (lack of manpower, competition with soybean over land, production costs, and climate conditions) have contributed to the decrease in horticultural production, particularly in vegetables. Supply is not as large as it was 10 years ago (Interviews 5, 17, 29, 49). Consequently, different vegetables or fruit prices have increased, changing the ways of doing business. Nowadays, wholesalers know that they sell less quantity than before, but make more profit for each fresh produce box because of its high profit margin. Thus, wholesalers are not interested in any kind of intervention that can put their business in danger. However, the intervention did not stop their profitable activities. Despite the wholesalers' complaints, they used their own knowledge and capacity to sell products at official and non-official prices, according to quality. As usual, these practices generated a black market that allowed wholesalers to earn more money during this intervention context.

Beyond the National Domestic Trade Department's intervention, wholesalers appreciated the fact that, at least for price control purposes, the national government had shown an interest in the fresh fruit and vegetable industry. Nevertheless, they pointed out that the national government focuses only on short-term economic gain and not on long-term development policies. Wholesalers expected the government to be genuinely concerned about the fresh fruit and vegetable industry. In addition, they criticised the National Institute of Statistics and Censuses (INDEC) for their lack of knowledge about the sector, which prevents them from making any distinctions between quality and product varieties. 'In their opinion', wholesalers argued accusingly, 'apples are apples but we know that there are different varieties and qualities of apples' (Interview 47).

The price control established by the National Government in 2006 affected the everyday lives of other social actors at the BACWM as well. One of the chairmen resigned since he did not agree with the policy followed by the auditor (Delatorre 2007). The intervention generated different reactions among civil servants and wholesalers. They showed discomfort by gossiping about different extortion practices. A conversation between two vendors can explain how extortion worked during the period of price control (Field note 38, 15 March 2007):

> V1: 'If Moreno comes here, I will lie. I will say that I sold lettuce at the official price. This marketplace is a big lie. Everybody lies. Wholesalers cry, but they are earning money and they do not conduct 100% of their transactions legally… Anyway, I was talking to an employee of Moreno's and he told me that they will come to control and extort us if we do not sell fresh produce at official prices.'
>
> V2: 'Yes, they have already started. They asked me about the condition of my fire extinguisher.'

This type of interaction, which transforms into a process of negotiation between the auditor and social actors sunk in this price control struggle, shows extortion and intervention at the same time. Wholesalers were indicted on different grounds for different causes. The extortion was one of the means used by the auditor in order to ask wholesalers to collaborate in lowering their prices.

During my fieldwork, I was notified by a civil servant who works at the maintenance section that he had to '*apretar*' (slang for 'to bully') a wholesaler. We went to this wholesaler's stall. The employee told me that he knew that the water meter was only an excuse of the administrators who wanted him to sell his products at the official prices. The civil servant asked me to go away since he did not want to intimidate the wholesaler in my presence. So, I went to the pavilion's bar where I could see the interaction between them. Although the control seemed a routine inspection to a wholesaler, it was not. After inspection, the wholesaler started waving his

arms and grabbing his head while around him his workers listened. He was warned to reduce his prices and to adhere to the official ones.

This event shows that both parties of this transaction had different objectives in mind and would describe what was happening in terms of policy intervention (from the point of view of a civil servant) or extortion (from the point of view of a wholesaler). This does not mean that any of them as private actors would argue that checking the fire extinguisher is in itself an act of extortion. Although vendors or wholesalers at stalls could say they were willing to lie if necessary (Field note 38), they knew that their choices and behaviours are influenced by others, in this case by administrative price and control techniques. During this transaction, surveillance symbols were used. The civil servant acted as a mediator between official norms and wholesalers' everyday practices. He tried to ensure that a price policy message would be understood in the precise way its sender intended: the wholesaler had to lower the price of his fresh produce.

## Conclusion

This chapter has shown that the BACWM's organisation comprises an unstable space. It seems that total co-ordination/control might not be achieved in this marketplace. Eventual limitations are linked to counter-tendencies that bureaucracy (i.e. norms, regulation and controls) generates in its relationships between involved actors. These interactions promote alternative agendas to the way the BACWM is co-ordinated (cf. Arce and Long 2000b). This chapter illustrated these counter-tendencies by taking into account interactions between chairmen, civil servants, and wholesalers.

At the interface of these interactions, emergent properties are developed, shaping BACWM's social life. There are different views about the BACWM's organisation according to the social actors interviewed. Social discourses give the impression that hierarchy is linked to the visibility of this marketplace. Hierarchy describes the actions of chairmen and civil servants as 'public' actions, while 'private' actions are connected to wholesalers' networks and informal relationships. This chapter has demonstrated that these categorisations are ambiguous in practice since social relations cross conceptual boundaries. For instance, actors' briberies and favours show a 'grey' area between 'private' and 'public' spheres, making categorisation difficult (cf. Dewey 1954, Weintraub 1997). If this is the case, why are wholesalers, civil servants and chairmen still using these categorisations when in practice actors are influenced by each other? Is this because social action is somehow independent of the conceptual categorisation of a reality? Probably they do not want to acknowledge the fact that their behaviour is somehow affected by others (Homans 1958: 598) regardless of their being civil servants or wholesalers.

The abstract classification used by social actors prompts a discursive battle-field between the social actors involved at the BACWM. There are worlds of

opinions opposing each other. While wholesalers consider chairmen and civil servants to be ignorant about the fresh fruit and vegetable industry as well as to be corrupt persons, civil servants and chairmen defend themselves from wholesalers' accusations by pointing out that bribes can only circulate by agreement between two parties. These different opinions show the intense interactions that take place between these social actors at the BACWM. Despite the clear division mentioned in their statements, corrupt practices as well as successful negotiations take place at both hierarchical and network organisations.

These complex interactions were illustrated by two political interventions in the BACWM at different historical moments: Mr. Patti (1993–1995) and Mr. Moreno (2006–present). Mr. Patti's experience is recalled as a successful administration, 'the only successful administration at the BACWM', according to different social actors. Thus, Mr. Patti is still renowned as a symbol of order by both civil servants and wholesalers. His success as a chairman can be linked to his own interest in orderliness rather than to the need to improve fresh fruit and vegetable distribution. Mr. Patti arrived at a particularly difficult moment and he cleaned the BACWM up of briberies and other illegal activities. This action reinforced the BACWM's function as a commercial distribution hub. Mr. Patti based his administrative success on surveillance elements devised to control the visibility of social actors operating at this marketplace (yellow line, uniform, etc.). However, this should not be confused with co-ordination. It seems that Mr. Patti's administration was not able to efficiently co-ordinate the BACWM.

Mr. Moreno's intervention is oriented to manipulate national prices of fresh fruit and vegetables in order to control the course of the national economy and to fulfil the requirements of international agencies. This intervention has increased the heterogeneity of interactions (personal and institutional contacts) and has led to the existence of the parallel circulations of fresh produce (at official prices and at real prices). Mr. Moreno's price intervention has gone beyond the organisation of the BACWM's facilities, rearranging the amalgam created by hierarchical and network organisations. This is illustrated by the public and private meetings that Mr. Moreno maintains with small and large wholesalers.

Another example of the counter-tendencies generated by the hierarchical organisation is the wholesale market network operating in Buenos Aires metropolitan area. Despite the efforts of national government to legalise these marketplaces, BACWM's wholesalers and civil servants' perception is that these markets are not legal institutions. BACWM's wholesalers argue that these small markets are unfair competitors since they sell 100% in the black market, while at the BACWM it is not possible to do that at least in that high a proportion. Social practices show intense horizontal interaction between the BACWM and the other small wholesale marketplaces. In the first place, some wholesalers at the BACWM sell at more than one marketplace, increasing their customer portfolio; even some porters work at different wholesale markets. In the second place, local politicians support these small wholesale markets

because they represent an important source of revenue and employment. In summary, it seems that norms and rules generate counter-tendencies linked to horizontal and informal relations combining different ways of organisation in fresh fruit and vegetable distribution.

The purpose of this chapter was to show different views of and tensions between the social actors at the BACWM. These views represent diverse interests and positions about commercial activities and the function of administration. At the interface of these interactions, some counter-tendencies tend to fragment BACWM's hierarchical organisation into different informal networks. These countertendencies can be conceptualised as emergent properties that construct the BACWM as an unstable space.

# 6 Expression of the global in local social practices: The interface between wholesalers and supermarkets

## Introduction

A growing body of literature (Boselie et al. 2003, Gibbon 2003, Hatanaka et al. 2006, Reardon et al. 2005, Reardon et al. 2003) has highlighted the increasing power of supermarkets on fresh food distribution in the last years. International mergers and acquisitions and aggressive pricing strategies have concentrated market power in the hands of a few major retailers. In the 1990s, supermarkets started to buy from growers worldwide, becoming important global actors with a large capacity to control food net-chains through their economies of scale (Brown 2005).

Supermarkets have innovated and transformed the relationship between supply and demand in different ways. In order to reduce their transaction costs, supermarkets have implemented supply chain management (SCM), driven the rise of global private standards (Busch and Bain 2004), and

introduced new actors and functions such as third party certification (TPC). The impact of supermarkets on the Latin American food net-chain was granted a special issue of *Development Policy Review* (Belik and Rocha dos Santos 2002, Faiguenbaum et al. 2002, Farina 2002b, Ghezán et al. 2002a, Gutman 2002, Reardon and Berdegué 2002, Schwentesius and Gomez 2002). These studies show supermarkets as dominant actors of the agri-food industry in Latin America, having transformed deeply the system in 10 years, while in the United States or Europe the same process took 50 years.

The fresh fruit and vegetable sector is particularly important for supermarkets since it can be a shopping destination in its own right. Many authors (Codron et al. 2004, Dolan and Humphrey 2000, Farina 2002b, Ghezán et al. 2002a, Gibbon 2003, Schwentesius and Gomez 2002) have focused on the impact of supermarkets on the fresh fruit and vegetable sector. By taking into account empirical data from different countries, these authors point out that supermarkets diminish their risks and costs by buying directly from growers who have to achieve their quality and logistic demands. Although Gibbon (2003), Boselie (2003) and Schwentesius and Gómez (2002) suggest that domestic market regulations should restrict the supermarkets' power in order to protect independent retailers and wholesalers, it seems that global forces of production and consumption have created limits to the historically assumed sphere of action of the national states (Bonanno et al. 1994, Marsden and Arce 1995a).

In the particular case of fresh fruit and vegetable distribution in Argentina, this process of changes can be analysed through social interactions developed between buyers (supermarket procurement officers) and sellers (vendors or wholesalers at BACWM's stalls). As shown in Chapter 2, supermarket procurement officers are employees of transnational companies that started buying fresh fruit and vegetables from wholesalers at the BACWM in the beginning of the 1980s. Then, in order to avoid middlemen, supermarkets by-passed wholesalers and dealt directly with growers. However, few wholesalers (specialised ones) continued to supply supermarkets. Thus, this chapter aims at understanding the evolution of the relationship between wholesalers and supermarkets by using the concept of interface (Arce and Long 1992, Long 1989, 2001a, Long and Villarreal 1993). The research questions are: How was the evolution of the relationships between wholesalers and supermarket procurement officers? How do wholesalers transfer and negotiate knowledge with buyers such as supermarket procurement officers who have their own high quality and logistic requirements? And what is the outcome of these kinds of interactions?

The relation between specialised wholesalers and supermarket procurement officers involves multiple levels of knowledge and power, which are negotiated in each transaction. These constant interactions are full of expectations and preferences from both parts, which generate an unplanned result that goes beyond the individual parts (cf. Arce 1989, Long 1989). Thus, knowledge and new ways of circulating fresh fruit and vegetables emerge from diverse social interactions between these buyers and suppliers.

This chapter is organised as follows. The first part describes briefly the evolution of supermarkets in Argentina. Through wholesalers' experiences, opinions and an individual wholesaler's biography, the second part strives to make visible the invisible aspects of this complex relationship. The third part explains the interface between wholesalers and supermarkets from the supermarket procurement officers' own frames of reference. In other words, this chapter shows how these different social actors are able to construct and deconstruct a new 'competitive space' (Marsden et al. 1998).

## Supermarkets in Argentina

Commercial retailing of fresh fruit and vegetables was mainly developed in small stores and street markets from the 1950s to the 1970s. However, there was also a group of hypermarkets such as Minimax, Gigante, Llaneza and Satélite. While the first of these hypermarkets was owned by the North American multimillionaire Rockefeller, the other three were owned by Argentinean entrepreneurs. There were also supermarkets, the most important of which were La Estrella Argentina, El Hogar Obrero, Norte, Disco, Metro and Tía. Various advantages linked to the national labour regulations allowed them to grow until the 1970s (Gutman 2002). However, in the 1980s, two of the hypermarkets and El Hogar Obrero went bankrupt, and most of their suppliers did not receive their money back. In general, most of these commercial formats did not make any changes in Argentina until the 1980s.

Transformations started with the settlement of foreign companies such as Carrefour (French, 1982), Jumbo (Chilean, 1982), Makro (North American, 1987) and Wal-Mart (North American, 1995), and the reconstruction of national companies like Tía (1945), Norte (1960) and Coto (1971). These changes were a consequence of new Argentinean economic deregulation (i.e. the Argentinean government removed or reduced restrictions on business, liberalising the economy to increase foreign investments), as well as of the implementation of monetary stabilisation policies, and international trade consolidation. These conditions enabled foreign direct investment (FDI) to develop. Besides Argentinean economic and political conditions, those companies had also their own goals related to their expansion around the world.

The multinational companies decided to conquer new markets such as those of Latin America for several reasons: the saturation of their domestic markets, which could no longer offer growth opportunities, the legal advantages (good tax conditions to invest and work) of the new markets, the good commercial profits, the stability of local economies, the great possibilities of acquiring or creating joint ventures with local and prestigious retailer firms, and the low level of competitiveness present at least until the 1990s (Belik and Rocha dos Santos 2002: 517).

In Argentina, the intensive competition among large retailers during the 1990s implied new strategies, such as new formats, expansion to new geographic

areas (medium-size towns), logistics and investments in facilities, new policies and commercial practices with their suppliers, development of their own brand in order to increase differentiation and diversification and customer loyalty (Gutman 1997). In only one decade, eight of the top international large retailers were represented in the most important Argentinean cities. Although Table 6.1 shows a list of emblematic acquisitions and mergers, it does not represent many other acquisitions of small national and regional companies by domestic retailer firms during this period.

***Table 6.1. Major mergers and acquisitions in food retail, Argentina: 1996/2000***

| Year | Purchaser | Firm purchased | US$ m. | Transaction |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1996 | Disco (Velox Group, Uruguay) | Su Super-Mercado (regional) | 72 | Purchase (100%) |
| 1996 | Exxel Group (investment fund, US) | Supermercados NORTE (national) | 440 | Purchase (100%) |
| 1998 | PROMODES (France) | Supermercados NORTE (Exxel G.) | 480 | 49% of stock |
| 1998 | Royal Ahold (The Netherlands) | Disco (Uruguay and Argentina) | 368 | 51% of stock of Disco; 36% of stock of Santa Isabel (Chilean) |
| 1998 | Exxel/Promodes (US/France) | TIA SA (national) | 630 | Purchase (100%) |
| 1998 | Disco/Ahold (Uruguay, Argentina, The Netherlands) | Supermercados VEA (national) | 210 | Purchase of stores |
| 1998 | Royal Ahold | Disco and Santa Isabel in Chile | 368 | Participating in stockholding |
| 1999 | PROMODES (France) | Supermercados NORTE (Exxel G.) | Not available | Purchase of further 2% of stock to achieve majority |
| 1999 | Casino (France) | Hipermercados Libertad SA (national) | 202.5 | 75% of stock |
| 1999 | Disco/Ahold (Holding) | Supermercados Americanos (national) | 150 | Purchase (100%) |
| 2000 | Carrefour/Promodes | International Fusion | | |
| 2000 | Disco/Ahold (Holding) | Ekono (Chilean) | 150 | Purchase (100%) |
| 2001 | Carrefour/PROMODES | Supermercados NORTE (Exxel G.) | Not available | Purchase of rest (49%) of stock |
| 2003 | Jumbo (CENCOSUD) | Disco/Ahold | 315 | Purchase (100%) |
| 2004 | San José (Building Firm) | Auchan | 50 | Purchase (100%) |

*Source: Gutman (2002), INTA (1993-2009).*

The result of these mergers and acquisitions was a drastic increase in economic concentration and foreign capital in Argentinean retailing: five large foreign enterprises (Carrefour, Jumbo, Wal Mart, Makro, and Casino) and two national retailer firms currently control 77.5% of the supermarket sector sales. The national companies today are Coto and La Anónima. Coto started in 1970 as a chain of butcher's shops in a small town and then expanded in Buenos Aires city with a supermarket, which was formerly for people with a low to medium income. La Anónima is a chain located initially in the South (Patagonia) and currently also in the centre of Argentina (Gutman 2002, INTA 1993–2009).

Aggressive competition between supermarkets make these formats differentiate according to diverse strategies associated with the quality of service offered, kinds of products, prices, brand-image, location of stores, etc. Changing the competitive circumstances dislocates supermarkets' identities, spreading different brands to cover more than one commercial profile. Thus, at the end of the 1990s, the economic crisis and global tendencies led large retailers to develop new strategies, such as hard discounts, specially aimed at lower-income consumers, by taking advantage of the efficiencies and economies of scale to undercut their prices. These new formats are characterised by the offer of a limited number of products, most of them of their own brand (Viteri and Carrozzi 2001). In addition, Asian immigrants, particularly Chinese and Thai, absorbed 16% of the sales in self-service formats in 2001. The responsibility of fresh fruit and vegetable distribution in some of these self-service formats are in the hands of Bolivians (Cavallera 2006, Cendón et al. 2007).

Fresh fruit and vegetables constituted about 5% of supermarkets' sales, occupying the fourth place among their value food sales, at the turn of the millennium (INDEC 2001). The importance of this fresh produce was its higher profit margin (rapid turn-over) and their image of freshness and cleanliness, which attracts customers (Ghezán et al. 2002a). Consequently, supermarkets induced processes of innovation in their fresh food supply, by implementing patterns of technological, organisational and institutional innovations in the mid-1990s.

They centralised procurement from each store to a distribution centre serving several stores in a given zone or region. This implied an investment in warehouses and sophisticated information technology and chain management. By using distribution centres and logistic platforms, supermarkets solved different aspects of their supply, such as transport and labour costs, information flows or inventory visibility, management across multiple geographically diverse locations (transporting/shipping, storage), and merchandise losses and robbery within the value net-chain (Lazzarini et al. 2001). Additionally, they concentrated the decision-making process at purchase centres. Centralisation increased their efficiency of procurement by reducing co-ordination and other transaction costs, although it may increase transport costs due to extra movement of the actual products (Gutman 2002, Humphrey 2007).

Supermarkets adopted organisational innovation by means of a shift from reliance on spot markets (e.g. the BACWM) to the use of specialised wholesalers (cf. Reardon et al. 2005). These wholesalers are specialised in a few products and dedicated to supermarket demands. To this end, these wholesalers have invested in logistic facilities to procure consolidated supply throughout the year. Until 1995, supermarkets used to buy 90% of fresh fruit and vegetables at the BACWM and then restricted their relationships to a few specialised wholesalers (see Chapter 2). They started buying particular products such as potatoes, tomatoes, apples, lemons directly from growers, especially large ones, without passing through wholesalers. However, since some production takes place among many small growers, wholesalers still played an important role in supplying supermarkets (Gutman 1997). This implies that nowadays supermarkets still use a hybrid system of procurement, combining the provision from growers and specialised wholesalers (de Raymond 2007).

As institutional innovations, supermarkets implemented their own private quality and safety standards. These standards function as an instrument of co-ordination of supply chains by standardising product requirements. Since quality is standardised by simple criteria such as colour, size, and presentation, supermarket procurement officers focus on logistics rather than taste, freshness or texture. All these changes in supermarket strategies have impacted on their relationships with suppliers. The following section will attempt to understand these changes in an empirical way.

## Few Wholesalers Became Specialised-Wholesalers

Nowadays, for many wholesalers, supermarkets are the root of all evil. Thus, when wholesalers are asked about supermarkets, they show a sort of love-hate relationship. This can be linked to the evolution of the relationships between supermarket procurement officers and wholesalers. Some of the wholesalers interviewed pointed out two different stages in their relationships. Initially, supermarkets were their best buyers, whereas later supermarkets were no longer the 'convenient' customers they used to be.

At the end of the 1980s, there was an excess amount of fruit and vegetables in the market, and thus everybody looked for customers who wanted to buy a considerable quantity of their products. Supermarkets were then the 'perfect' buyers for that. In the beginning, supermarkets were not interested in demanding high quality products or special services such as deliveries. On the contrary, they followed the wholesalers' rules of the game. Therefore, every wholesaler was able to sell a variety of products to supermarkets. One of the wholesalers interviewed, who used to sell pumpkins to them, argued:

> 'It was like having a fiancé [referring to the supermarket procurement officer] who travelled to somewhere far-away, and either fell in love with someone else or died… If somebody asked me about her I would have said she died. I'm not planning to sell

> those large amounts of merchandise to supermarkets any more. I have hernia, diabetes, I'm 50 years old and I don't want to receive less money than I agreed [referring to supermarkets deductions or discounts].'[44]
>
> 'Many wholesalers fell in love with supermarkets in the 1990s. Everybody wanted to sell their products to supermarkets, but soon most of them went bankrupt. This was because they were beginning to jeopardize their productions since they invested in facilities like greenhouses or made agreements with growers by giving some inputs to assure supermarkets to be their main buyers. Then, suddenly, without previous notice, supermarkets decided to buy directly from growers' (Interview 49, 5 March 2007).

Since many wholesalers used to sell products to supermarkets in the beginning, the former opinion is frequently doing the rounds at the BACWM. When supermarkets changed their sourcing strategies in the mid-1990s, because of competition, several wholesalers were no longer able to sell fresh produce to them. Thus, this wholesaler's comment shows how he feels after attempting to have supermarkets as his main buyers. He feels that he invested everything he had and received nothing in return.

Many wholesalers who lost supermarkets as customers criticise the purchase conditions and rules imposed by these retailers. They point to supermarkets as 'bad lovers', and use the word 'death' to refer to the end of their business relationships with them. This shows their ambiguous feelings about important buyers such as supermarkets. They blame supermarkets for their own loss of power in fresh fruit and vegetable distribution, since supermarket procurement officers preferred to contact growers or specialised wholesalers because of economies of scale. Similar feelings are expressed by some specialised wholesalers who still have supermarkets as their main buyers. One of them uses football as a metaphor to explain his commercial transactions with supermarkets:

> 'Supermarkets are the Maradona [referring to the famous Argentinean football player] of fruit and vegetables. Once, a well-known supermarket chain went to my partner [a Uruguayan orange grower] trying to avoid me as a nexus. And they did it successfully. Consequently I lost my minimum commission from the orange grower. What could I do? I continued my business with supermarkets

[44] According to Gutman (2002), the price and payment period of supermarkets (between 90 and 190 days) are not the only conditions that these large retailers impose on suppliers. Supermarkets can pay less than agreed to suppliers because of quality conditions (perishable products can develop differently) or promotions or bonuses, since they buy large volumes of product from suppliers, and thus growers have to pay for this opportunity. Other conditions are: logistical requirements (forms and frequency of product delivery); ex-post discounts at the time of payment, without previous notification; slotting fees (for shelf-space); fees for risk and cost sharing during the introduction of new products; fees for opening stores to suppliers. This practice reaches every supermarket in any country in the world.

> but under other conditions [less profitable conditions]' (Interview 69, 23 April 2007).

According to this wholesaler, he lost his capacity to act as a middleman because the supermarket was able to surpass him, contacting his supplier directly. However, some wholesalers have shown their own capacity to constitute their supply network in order to maintain supermarkets as their main buyers. Thus, these wholesalers started to integrate primary production, make agreements with other growers and invest in logistics and facilities, thus becoming important suppliers to supermarkets. These transformations are linked with the wholesalers' relationships with supermarkets. The following empirical case will show part of the complex relations developed between wholesalers and supermarket procurement officers.

## The Story of a Specialised-Wholesaler

**Mr. S**'s biography shows how the so-called traditional wholesalers were able to learn and adapt their enterprises to competitive pressures by constructing new networks of supply, following supermarkets' developments and demands.

Mr. S (see Case-study 5 in Chapter 4) is about 45 years old and the owner of the holding Frutícola Mr. S S.R.L. This holding is constituted of five firms: 1) Gourmet Service, which supplies to restaurants, hotels, catering, institutional cantinas, etc.; 2) vegetable production, packaging and distribution, which works in association with 20 vegetable growers, especially tomato growers; 3) neat-pack transport; 4) a *filial* that repacks and distributes different products of the holding; and 5) *Frutícola Mr. S S.R.L.*, the mother firm started in 1984 at the BACWM. According to BACWM's Corporation (MCBA 2007), *Frutícola Mr. S S.R.L.* moves around $12 million of merchandise a year (€3 million in 2006) at the wholesaling level only, since the company also does business outside the BACWM. *Frutícola Mr. S S.R.L.* is one of the 25 leader firms at the BACWM. Mr. S himself explains his beginnings in Argentina:

> 'I was born and grew up in Calabria (Italy) and I have lived in Argentina for almost 25 years. I have been working in this activity since I arrived here. I have been able to overcome the different Argentinean economic crises, but each of these crises caught me in a more risky position. The last one was particularly painful and I don't think that I will ever forget it. I just wish that this will be the last one that catches me, because if I have not been able to learn so far…' (Field note 48, 5 May 2007).

Mr. S is a passionate wholesaler. Although his Italian family was not linked to food activities, he fell in love with fresh fruit and vegetable markets in 1982 and became more and more involved when he married a wholesaler's daughter. He started to work as an employee in an old wholesale market in Buenos Aires city. At the same time, he invested in five greengrocers, showing an innovative profile in his beginnings. In 1984, when wholesalers were forced to move from the old 23 wholesale markets to the new BACWM, he decided to

start with his own stall there. Such experiences allowed him to grow both as a human being and professionally and his remarks on honesty and respect for the others also explain part of his success:

> 'I'm thankful to my first experiences at the BACWM. It was a disorganised process in the beginning, but that gave me training for leading my business in the future. My commercial talents grew. I learnt how important it was to be loyal in order to survive in the fresh fruit and vegetable world. Being loyal helped me to get buyers' attention and their fidelity to my stall and therefore my business increased and I sold more and more boxes of produce' (Field note 48, 5 May 2007).

Mr. S believes that this training helped him to move onto a new business stage, such as that of a supermarket supplier or a specialised wholesaler. He remembers his first meeting with Horst Paulmann, the owner of Jumbo, a Chilean chain retailer who settled his business in Argentina in 1982 (http://www.jumbo.com.ar):

> 'I had been working at the new wholesale market [the BACWM] for 12 months, when one day, while I was working as usual, I saw Horst Paulmann and his team walking around. Paulmann asked me: How could we have better fruit in our supermarkets stands? At that time (1985) nobody wanted to sell fresh products to supermarkets. We had had bad experiences with the first ones [referring to the former supermarkets whose owners went bankrupt]. We were in the era of street markets and municipal fairs. Nobody wanted to choose supermarkets as their main clients. But I thought that consumers were starting to like going to supermarkets because supermarkets allowed them to choose their own products. Supermarkets were clean, new and attractive places to buy, thus I thought this was a good moment to supply supermarkets. So, I offered to bring him fresh produce every day, including Sundays. That was the way I started to work with the first Jumbo hypermarket settled in Argentina' (Field note 48, 5 May 2007).

Mr. S realised that supermarkets were going to change Argentinean fresh fruit and vegetable distribution and he wanted to be one of the first suppliers. His agreement with supermarkets went from informal to formal contracts, enhancing Mr. S's capacity to negotiate effectively, and allowing him to become an important actor in supermarket procurement. During my interview, he explained how he improved his relationships with supermarkets, by involving other social actors:

> 'Jumbo had more difficulties to find good and fresh vegetables on the weekends because the BACWM does not work Saturdays and Sundays. Thus, I thought that they needed to buy the product that was harvested the same day in order to be able to offer fresh vegetables in optimal conditions. There was no cool chain in those days. So, we started to supply them even at weekends. That

> implied making a big effort to convince growers to work for supermarkets at weekends. Growers didn't want to be supermarkets' slaves. I was personally in charge of the weekend supplies, distributing our vegetables to their stands. I have worked for 20 years in that way, developing along with the supermarkets' growth' (Interview 29, 26 December 2006).

Mr. S's experience points out that supermarkets did not only create new demand, but also reshaped the relation between supply and demand. Thus, the first stage of the relationship between supermarket procurement officers and wholesalers was a win–win one. Both were developing and thus needed each other. Mr. S, like some other wholesalers at the BACWM, looked to add value in his deliveries. He started to buy products in different geographical areas and to integrate primary production. Consequently, his enterprise diversified into different activities such as packaging, transport, quality control, new products (imported fruits), cooling system, etc. He displayed different capacities linked with his own experience and knowledge, aiming to satisfy supermarket demands.

Mr. S, like a few other wholesalers, focused on the added value idea as a symbol of full service to maintain his relationships with supermarkets and increase his business. By doing so, Mr. S was able to make agreements with other growers and to contract agronomists to improve their production, especially with regard to vegetables. This generated different networks of interaction and exchanges of knowledge and conflicts, where competitive, and sometimes co-operative, relationships were developed. For instance, specialised wholesalers competed and still compete to have good technical consultants in order to have an advantage over the other supermarket suppliers. However, they also created co-operative relationships with a few wholesalers, asking them for their products in order to fill out a particular supermarket delivery. In the case of fruits, since it is an export sector, growers had started innovating before the supermarket expansion. So, supermarkets bought directly from these export companies, which also have stalls or franchises at the BACWM. Nevertheless, they had to improve their deliveries as supermarkets developed their own logistics.

As explained before, the increasing sales power of supermarkets allowed them to surpass wholesalers and go directly to growers in the 1990s. By doing so, they changed the power relationship, becoming themselves 'highly valued' customers. For instance, they started to import bananas directly since the national context such as the exchange rate was favourable (1 dollar: 1 peso). Although supermarkets had to rely on wholesalers for some fresh produce, wholesalers started to miss their position as main supermarket suppliers. Despite the relationship of mutual learning and development, wholesalers never recognised supermarkets as partners but rather as 'enemies'. Since wholesalers carried out their businesses passionately, they perceived their relationships with supermarket procurement officers in the same way. According to wholesalers there are no intermediate situations, there are only agreements or disagreements. Consequently, Mr. S explains his selling process

to supermarkets by pointing out that supermarkets did not do things well, whereas he did his best:

> 'In the beginning we invested in logistics, new varieties, transport and presentation in order to improve our deal with different supermarket companies. We also produced under norms of low environmental impact [see Chapter 7]. However, supermarkets were not interested in this way of producing. Because they did not want to depend on us, they refused the idea that consumers would know our brand and would be loyal to it' (Field note 48, 5 May 2007).

Even though Mr. S's disappointment with supermarkets is considerable, he still sells fresh produce to them because they buy a significant amount of merchandise. It is worth noting that other wholesalers, who continue to sell to supermarkets, do not show many signs of frustration. One of them (Interview 72) prefers selling his products based on a long-term agreement to sell them through the instable and speculative system operated at the BACWM. He defines himself as an entrepreneur who supplies to supermarkets, and who prefers delegating the activity of selling at the stall to one of his employees who loves the speculative price formation process. During my interview he told me the following:

> 'This market [the BACWM] is only a reference price to me. I can do business either above or below the average price of the BACWM. Small retailers come and ask for prices. Then, they return and ask again… Some of them come at the end of the sales in order to achieve the best price, but also worse quality. Nevertheless, I prefer the strategy of supermarkets or fast-food shops (i.e. flat and long-term prices). That is why we sell only 10% of our supply in the BACWM' (Interview 72, 7 March 2008).

This wholesaler found the opportunity to change his work scheme from an arbitrary price formation (supply and demand linked with climatic conditions and speculations) to uniform prices and weekly and long-term agreements. Nevertheless, his enterprise still works at the BACWM, combining the 'economy of homogeneity' (supermarkets) with the 'economy of variability' (the BACWM) (cf. de Raymond 2007). It seems that some good synergies have been created between wholesalers and supermarkets. Different strategies followed by wholesalers redefined their customer relations and competitive spaces. Although every specialised wholesaler complains about supermarkets' promotion strategies, they strive to reach an agreement because of supermarkets' capacity to buy large volume. One of them explains the importance of wholesaling despite the badly organised BACWM:

> 'We are very badly organised at the BACWM. I'm working here because they [government authorities] forced me to. Nowadays this market can only commercialise 40% of the volume consumed at Buenos Aires and Great Buenos Aires [11.4 million inhabitants]. For instance, we have been selling to supermarkets since 1993/94. It is

> our best alternative, 70% of our supply is delivered from our warehouse [outside of the BACWM] to supermarkets, catering, and warehouses spread over different geographical areas. We have an advantage over growers because we can offer more than 15 different articles to supermarkets…' (Interview 43, 22 March 2007).

This specialised wholesaler's practices contribute to increasing the complexity of fresh fruit and vegetable circulation since part of his sales volume does not pass by the BACWM. Nevertheless, as shown above, specialised wholesalers still keep their stalls at this marketplace. Mr. S considers the BACWM to be an excellent alternative to diversify his business and reduce the risk of supplying only to supermarkets:

> 'I am convinced that the existence of the BACWM is necessary for the process of price formation. Also, most of us [specialised wholesalers] overcome the rules and requirements of supermarkets because we had other alternatives of commercialisation [referring to small retailers who buy produce at the BACWM]' (Interview 29, 26 December 2006).

Although Mr. S uses the strategy of diversification, he knows that supermarkets are still important buyers. Nevertheless, he insists that supermarket procurement officers do not have enough knowledge to manage fresh fruit and vegetables. They only know about profits. In his passionate way of seeing, Mr. S explains the disadvantages of keeping supermarkets as his main customers:

> 'There is a lack of alliance with supermarkets. Their 'inefficiencies' are always transferred to us. Their employees [fresh fruit and vegetable buyers] know only about numbers [referring only to economic benefits, without taking account of loyalty or quality]. They know nothing about marketing [protocol of production, traceability, etc.]. They always charge to your bill a percentage of cost [scale of growth, volume of sales, logistics, etc.] since they give you the opportunity to supply them, do you understand? Also, you have to add the financial part. You always have to wait 90 or 190 days for them to pay you. In addition, if they are not able to sell your products, they discount part of the volume of product in the next purchase. This model attempts against the production model [see Gutman 2007]' (Field note 48, 5 May 2007).

Although it seems that selling produce to supermarkets is an impossible/a Don Quixote enterprise according to Mr. S, specialised wholesalers strive to continue in business since they have invested in human resources, primary production, logistics and facilities in order to satisfy supermarket demands. Thus, Mr. S's story illustrates how wholesalers have faced problematic situations, interacting and performing with other social worlds or social configurations. Although both supermarket procurement officers and wholesalers have different and divergent configurations of knowledge, their creative actions encounter a specific agreement to deal with fresh food. Both

have searched to diminish transaction costs and receive profits from their transactions but, while specialised wholesalers have used their own experiences and symbolic 'codes', supermarket procurement officers have tried to introduce their rational and logical ways of buying in order to achieve the goals of international retailers. In other words, wholesalers have shown that they are able to combine their own local knowledge with hegemonic and global actors such as supermarkets. Although both supermarket procurement officers and specialised wholesalers are not partners, they are frequently able to reorganise their own experiences in order to overcome their disparities and incompatibilities (cf. Blanco 2007).

## Supermarket Procurement Officers' Perspective

This section explains how supermarket procurement officers understand their relationships with specialised wholesalers, taking into account its evolution over time. Although wholesalers make their sales to supermarkets over the phone or on the Internet, some supermarket procurement officers prefer going to the BACWM. They go to see the products offered, talk to stall sellers or stall-owners, meet each other at the bar and, of course, do business. The presence of supermarket procurement officers at the BACWM is visible. They distinguish themselves from all others because they usually wear white shirts and walk around with a folder in their hands, giving the impression of being inspectors.

In order to interview supermarket procurement officers, it was first necessary to contact them. As an outsider, a way to do so was to ask wholesalers and civil servants to establish the contact. Nonetheless, according to them, supermarket procurement officers are not easy to reach. As an example of this, the following statements from a civil servant and a wholesaler, respectively, show part of the imagery that supermarkets arouse from the social actors at the BACWM:

> 'I don't even know them. They don't come to the market [the BACWM] any more. They make their orders on the phone or by email. They are difficult people. You can't talk to them. Nowadays they are yuppies. One of the most famous ones, who used to buy produce for supermarkets, is now working for a fruit export company. You can see him at the company stall. He would make a good candidate to interview, but I don't think he will accept. He is a very arrogant man' (Interview 69(a), 17 April 2007).

> 'I can give you some phone numbers to contact procurement officers. Go and contact Valenciaga (one of the employees of one of the large supermarket chains) and tell him that he is God. He invented fresh fruit and vegetables… Then tell him that somebody at the BACWM says that the policy of supermarkets is destroying middlemen. Their motto is that it is better not to make alliances since there are too many suppliers who want to sell products to supermarkets' (Interview 69(b), 17 April 2007).

Although from the perspectives of wholesalers and civil servants supermarket procurement officers are inaccessible people, I was able to interview both former and current officers. The first interview granted was at the BACWM, where a medium-size supermarket company has its purchase office. In a distended and friendly interview, this supermarket procurement officer explains:

> 'In the beginning, we used to buy at the BACWM [1985]. But nowadays we buy products that are concentrated in particular geographical areas, such as potatoes, citrous fruit or apples, directly from growers. This implied that we had to contact growers from different geographical areas. This way of supplying allowed us to reduce our freights costs and bulk breaking. Hence, we did the same with other products, surpassing middlemen in other products in the 1990s' (Interview 44, 30 April 2007).

Supermarkets have always had clear objectives, such as reducing supply costs. Consequently, this procurement officer showed how they tried to achieve their goals by surpassing wholesalers. Nevertheless, wholesalers had integrated primary production in order to improve their position as supermarket suppliers. Nowadays, those wholesalers frequently sell to supermarkets from their own packaging plant or orchard, and occasionally supplement deliveries from their wholesale stalls. Therefore, supermarket procurement officers do not associate with so-called 'traditional' wholesalers as their main suppliers. Nevertheless, the procurement officers interviewed emphasised that supermarkets have given to wholesalers and growers an opportunity to develop their businesses. Thus, during my interviews some supermarket procurement officers told me:

> 'We gave lots of opportunities of growing to producers or middlemen. My objective was to construct a relation of confidence with them. This business needs win–win relationships. If I don't have suppliers, I don't have any product. If I don't have any product, I can't sell anything.' (Interview 70, 12 February 2008).

> 'I don't understand suppliers who always complain about the policy of supermarkets. They have increased their business thanks to supermarkets' (Interview 71, 21 February 2008).

> 'I remember when we started to be supplied by wholesalers. They used to bring products in returnable packaging without pallets by open-air trucks. The unloading was carried out by hand, bulk by bulk. This increased costs and caused damage to the merchandise. Once I said to a wholesaler, who is one of the largest nowadays: "I will stop buying from you if you don't improve your way of supplying…". Wholesalers who were interested in meeting our demand started to import produce from and integrate primary production in different geographical areas' (Interview 17, 27 April 2007).

The complex process developed by both groups of actors (wholesalers and supermarket procurement officers) implies a confrontation of different kinds of knowledge and points of view in relation with fresh produce distribution. This allowed them to learn from experience and from their willingness to make profits. Through these processes of transformation or negotiation (translation), they were able to approach their different points of view of distributing fresh products and to visualize different trajectories to achieve their own goals (cf. Callon 1986). Indeed, they both changed and transformed the way of supplying fresh fruit and vegetables. Both wholesalers and supermarket procurement officers have acquired new knowledge by exchanging their own tacit and explicit knowledge about fresh fruit and vegetable distribution.

Although supermarket procurement officers' discourses are linked to rational ideas of efficient performance and economic profit, they also face other kinds of challenges in their jobs. For instance, supermarket mergers and acquisitions impacted on their employment conditions in the 1990s. Consequently, these employees, who worked in various large retailers, tried to be more successful than others in order to achieve a good position, just in case the firm was sold. Most of them knew that their advantages were linked to their tacit knowledge and relationships (Polanyi 1967). Nevertheless, experienced procurement officers have been replaced by younger inexperienced ones nowadays and some of the old ones are now working in different fruit companies. An ex-employee believes he is too old to work under stress:

> 'When I got a new boss who knew nothing about fresh fruit and vegetables and requested quality even when there was a lack of production, I decided to give up my job. Nevertheless, thanks to my job in that supermarket, I was able to learn and contact important growers who gave me the opportunity to work with them.' (Interview 71, 21 February 2008).

Most of supermarket procurement officers have changed jobs from one retail company to another for a variety of reasons: the unemployment brought about by the new mergers or acquisitions, the pressure exerted by the new bosses who pushed employees to buy on the basis of prices rather than on quality and to work hard on weekends, etc. They recognise that working for supermarkets is not an easy task these days. Some of the reasons for this are that there is less national supply and more competition (greengrocers, Chinese supermarkets, etc.) than in the 1990s, and that the fresh fruit and vegetable sector in supermarkets is not making as much profit as it used to 10 years ago. So, supermarket managers no longer care (so much) about these products. They have even reduced personnel in the sector. Even worse, according to supermarket procurement officers, they operate under unequal conditions, since greengrocers do not pay as many taxes as they do when they buy fresh food. Although procurement officers have to follow hegemonic quality manuals, they have incorporated abilities to deal with the imprecise world of fresh fruit and vegetables in their everyday practices.

In spite of considering the BACWM as a traditional and non-modern marketplace, supermarket procurement officers still visit it more than once a week. They do so to check prices and the quality of products and exchange information about new products or harvest conditions in different geographical areas. Both the supermarket procurement officers and wholesalers interviewed agreed on the important role of the BACWM as a place to obtain price references and establish face-to-face relationships. One of the procurement-officers interviewed pointed out:

> 'The market [the BACWM] is an unlimited, daily and permanent source of information. It is like a 'thermometer' of fresh fruit and vegetable production and commercialisation. Although most of the national production does not pass through the Buenos Aires Central Wholesale Market, it is still a price reference market. Nevertheless, the price formation process at the BACWM is very irregular, with fluctuating prices. If you are a grower and know your production costs and yields, it will be better to have a contract with flat and long-term product prices. If you are a grower and you send your products to wholesale markets, you won't know how wholesalers sold them. So, if I were a grower, I would make agreements outside wholesale markets' (Interview 44, 30 April 2007).

From the discourses of supermarket procurement officers, it seems that selling to supermarkets is the best option for growers who want to avoid the speculative way of transactions at 'traditional' wholesale markets. Nevertheless, everyday practices show another reality. Even though specialised wholesalers agree to negotiate prices according to their production and logistic costs, they disagree with the strict quality requirement, which does not allow them to negotiate in other terms for these particular perishable products. In spite of the disagreements, this interface between specialised wholesalers and supermarket procurement officers has the capacity to reshape new spaces of competitiveness (Marsden et al. 1998). Parts of these interactions are developed at the BACWM, where different logics of distribution take place.

## Conclusions

The relationship between supermarket procurement officers and specialised wholesalers links two different sides of a commercial situation. Supermarkets need fresh fruit and vegetables, and specialised wholesalers know how to provide them since they know from experience how to commercialise these highly perishable products. By analysing their negotiations, which involve conflicts and different kinds/degrees of knowledge, it seems that the tacit knowledge embodied in specialised wholesalers with more than 10 years in wholesaling faces the 'manual' knowledge about quality and logistics that supermarkets want to implement in their procurements.

The process of negotiation between specialised wholesalers and supermarket procurement officers interconnects their strategies and capacities for drawing on existing knowledge repertoires and for absorbing new information. By doing so, the social actors involved at this interface have developed a process of knowledge acquisition, utilisation and transformation (Arce 1989, Arce and Long 1994, Long 1989, Long and Villarreal 1993). On the one hand, specialised wholesalers have proved their capacity to learn and adapt to competitive pressure by enrolling themselves in a complex network (growers, other wholesalers, agronomists, new varieties of fresh fruit and vegetables, greenhouses, warehouses, etc.). On the other hand, supermarkets have introduced new patterns of technological, organisational and institutional innovations, which have implied knowledge from multiple locations (Currah and Wrigley 2004).

This social encounter between supermarket procurement officers and specialised wholesalers is a clear example of how 'external' or geographically distant actors (transnational supermarkets in this case) shape social processes, strategies and actions in localised settings (the BACWM) (cf. Arce 2000). Supermarkets reconfigured the supply–demand relationship in the fresh fruit and vegetable net-chain, implementing their own logistics and quality criteria. In order to reduce transaction costs of provision, supermarkets started to rely on a few large suppliers. While this decision impacted negatively on many wholesalers who were not able to meet these new supermarket requirements, other wholesalers reshaped their relationships with supermarkets, becoming specialised wholesalers. These specialised wholesalers combine the logic of the homogeneous conditions of supermarkets with the 'economy of variability' developed at the BACWM (cf. de Raymond 2007). By using this strategy of combining different ways of commercialisation, specialised wholesalers were able to overcome the strict supermarket rules. Moreover, they show capacity to act differently according to diverse circumstances (Thévenot 2001). It means that they can act as both 'modern' and 'traditional' wholesalers at the same time.

Despite the rich potential of supermarket facilities and the transmission of tacit (and codified) knowledge through space (Internet), a face-to-face social interaction between buyers and suppliers is required (Currah and Wrigley 2004: 14). The face-to-face relationships developed at the BACWM show how supermarket procurement officers strive to transfer and negotiate knowledge and increase interactions with local counterparts. In other words, supermarket procurement officers and specialised wholesalers construct a new 'competitive space' through everyday practices (Marsden et al. 1998). This chapter has illustrated the construction of this space of 'homogeneity' through Mr. S's own biography (cf. Arce 1989). Mr. S, like other wholesalers, shared his best practices, which are inherently tacit knowledge, with supermarkets. This embodied knowledge has become central to supermarket procurement officers, who have to resolve practical problems every day. The transformation of Mr. S's life-world can be observed in how he manages his relations and how he attempts to give social meaning to his everyday

experiences. The development of Mr. S's business entails not only changing distribution and social patterns within his enterprise but also managing the relation with outsiders.

# 7 Quality as an expression of social interactions

*'A market necessarily reduces quality to quantity via price mechanism and promotes standardization; in markets, money talks, not people. Today, global capitalism is the most powerful force for homogenization.'*

*(Scott 1998: 8)*

*'A good can be described as a bundle of characteristics: quality, location, time, availability, consumer's information about its existence and … so on. Each consumer has a ranking over the mix of variables.'*

*(Tirole 1989: 96 quoted by Callon et al. 2002)*

## Introduction

This chapter will analyse quality as an expression of social interactions rather than an outcome of an abstract and hegemonic market suggested by Scott in one of the above epigraphs. By following social actors' practices and the

performance of food, it is possible to explain the social significance of quality (Arce 2009b). In this sense, the chapter attempts to answer the following questions: How difficult is to establish an official quality standard? How do supermarkets, greengrocers and wholesalers negotiate and construct their own quality standards? Why does the BACWM remain a highly personalised space for commercial transactions?

In order to contribute to a better understanding of the functioning, organisation and circulation of commodities embedded in a social context of quality, social interactions developed in the construction and representation of fresh produce quality were explored ethnographically. Concepts such as interface and emergent properties (Arce 1989, Long 1989) were used to analyse these social interactions generated around quality.

The first section of this chapter strives to clarify the concepts of quality and quality assurance through a literature review. The second section describes the geographical origins and seasonality of the main fresh fruit and vegetables cultivated and commercialised in Argentina as well as some aspects of their consumption. This description will introduce the reader to some of the complex attributes of fresh produce.

Finally, by means of case-studies, the remaining three sections focus on social interactions as generators of different quality circuits. Thus, social interactions have the capacity to create and recreate new and old ways of organising commercial circuits of fresh produce in the Buenos Aires metropolitan area.

## Situating the Issue of Quality

Quality can be characterised as a degree of excellence of something measured against other, similar things[45]. The introduction of the notion of quality is attributed to an economist, Lancaster (1966), who asserted that products consist of a bundle of attributes. The product utility is derived from certain attributes that the product holds as part of its contents or make-up (Sterns et al. 2001: 3).

Different attributes make something what it is. In the case of food these attributes include a full spectrum of parameters. These parameters are linked to health safety, nutrition, sensory/organoleptic characteristics (taste, colour, freshness, appearance, smell), process (traceability, biotechnology, organic) as well as extrinsic indicators, such as price, brand or advertising (Noelke and Caswell 2000, Sterns et al. 2001).

The above broad definition of quality is used enthusiastically by international bodies such as Codex (FAO 2006). However, the term is further defined by a multiplicity of different actors whose everyday activities are linked to the production, distribution and consumption of food. This implies that quality is

[45] From Oxford Dictionary http://www.encyclopedia.com/doc/1O999-quality.html

a fluid and socially constructed concept that is created and recreated constantly through the discourses and actions of actors (Marsden and Arce 1995b, Morris and Young 2000). The issue of quality overlaps domains associated with the perception of quality since each social actor has his/her own perception of quality (Goodman 2003, Ilbery and Kneafsey 2000). The only visible basis of quality for social relations appears to lie at the centre of connecting grades and standards.[46] Thus, quality constitutes a complex world creating cognitive and quantitative bridges, assembling time (seasonality) and space (geographical origins) of food products, with normative and tacit knowledge being inserted at the critical point between social relationships and the contemporary diversity of lifestyles.

Grades and standards are connected with visual perceptions (external information) as well as with credential attributes such as calories, drug residues, proteins or place of origin. Safety and hygienic requirements are established by distant regulatory institutions (nation states, international organisations or large retailers), which operate on both local and global social configurations. The role of grades and standards in food processes has changed through years.

Historically, grades and quality standards have been associated with differentiating technical methods and reducing transaction costs. Technical methods are useful to specify and harmonise products and their delivery attributes. Nowadays, the process of transnationalisation and diversification of food has crossed borders, and quality standards are differentiating more between agricultural processes and their natural products. Consequently, the implementation of quality is an important part of new forms of the organisation of procurement and the reconstruction of 'modern' supply systems (Busch 2000, Hatanaka and Busch 2008, Henson and Reardon 2005). In other words, grades and quality standards are not only economically rational devices to reduce transaction costs, but are also becoming instruments of organisation to compete in different markets. Thus, both processes – quality standardisation and quality differentiation – are taking place simultaneously in global food processes.

The complexity of the evolution of grades and standards demonstrates that quality is a contested notion that is variable depending on different situational criteria and historical moments (Marsden and Arce 1995b, Noelke and Caswell 2000). So, the concept of quality has changed according to different circumstances related to different health incidents and multiple consumer perceptions.

The consolidation of an industrialised agriculture changed the way that quality is now presented to consumers. Today, consumers are increasingly aware about food risks. *Escherichia coli* infections and bovine spongiform encephalopathy (BSE) are addressed to conceptualise the lack of quality

[46] In his historical perspectives, Scott (1998: 25-27) points out that every act of measurement was an act marked by play of power relations. However, non state forms of measurement grew from the logic of local practices.

control in contemporary food. The vanishing of quality from modern food has generated a significant body of critical research in Western countries (Goodman 2003, Murdoch et al. 2000). These studies have focused on the potential proliferation of alternative agri-food networks, as consumers' counterworks/reactions against industrial mainstream and market food circuits.

Although these studies have contributed significantly to implanting the notion of quality in local spaces (Goodman 2003), it is important to focus on the ambiguous behaviour of consumers. Consumers are both searching for 'alternative' products and buying at supermarkets or making fashionable specialised shops with little or no idea about how these products have arrived there or who produced them (Busch 2004). This degree of food 'ignorance' is complemented by consumers' seduction for convenience products (frozen, canned, or cut vegetables and ready meals). These products may imply industrial and chemical food processing, which is usually accompanied by negative impacts on the environment (Renard 1999).

Despite the ambiguous behaviour of consumers, some of them have shown certain tendencies to buy products that assure certain quality levels related to human health and the environment. Hence, private standards governed by large retailers (supermarkets) aim to facilitate efficiency and co-ordination in the process of supplying food around the globe. These standards have opened up new opportunities and new challenges for supermarket suppliers. The latter, in their quest to increase profits, have responded to the needs of supermarkets by adding value to their food products. Quality requirements today demand considerable management expertise from growers, who have to achieve these quality standards in their products. Quality is the unit of value of these large food retailers (Busch 2007, Gibbon 2003), they strive to homogenize quality (see Scott's epigraph).

The efficient co-ordination of the global food value chain (Dolan and Humphrey 2000, Gibbon 2003, Humphrey and Schmitz 2001, Reardon et al. 2001) satisfies legal and commercial quality requirements but reduces the range of fresh produce variety. Consequently, large food companies are shaping the functional division of labour among farmers and fulfilling the conditions of entry to specific markets. The manufacturing of a 'global food identity' for specific products overcomes national barriers. Bush (2004: 332) illustrates this situation by analysing how grades and standards – implemented by transnational companies – impact on every social actor involved in global value chains. Transnational enterprises make sure that suppliers worldwide achieve particular 'codes of conduct, production guidelines, and monitoring standards'. These normative procedures envelop producers and products in new surveillance institutions, such as third party certification bodies. Global rules on quality standards are generating new interactions and negotiations between food producers, processors, governments and consumers (Hatanaka and Busch 2008).

Quality standards are used by large food retailers as an image that they can repeat in a de-territorialised form to promote and examine food across

national borders. These transnational organisations are transforming the so-called economy of qualities into a global exercise of power in order to control different national/domestic food markets. This insight into the global stabilisation of quality reintroduces the ideas of centralisation and vertical control of food markets. Thus, it becomes necessary to seeing quality not only in terms of the organisational process of food from the corporative retailer orientation of profit and rationality but as a semi-autonomous filed, where quality can be less centralised and redistributed as part of the social life of food (Arce 2009b).

Quality is part of the historical trajectory of food in particular locations (Appadurai 1986), particular livelihoods, incomes and local entrepreneurial forms of organisation. The notion of quality has always existed as part of the local interactions between people and food, and the way people live and eat in households and social groups. Food contributes to establishing the individualised style in which people occupy a particular territory and this is usually expressed in food recipes and 'culinary traditions'. Despite the institutional codes and quality found in large retailers, the functions of food quality are located within a set of social interactions. Therefore, while we need to recognise the application of rationalisation and efficiency to food quality for profit by large retailers, we should analyse the social composition of quality among diverse forms of local entrepreneurs, livelihoods and neighbourhoods. Exchanging, transacting and consuming food involves different commoditised (money, utility) and non-commoditised (knowledge, long-term relations, etc.) elements that help social actors to qualify food products.

The non-commoditised factors have often remained inadequately analysed in food-quality studies. The attention usually goes to buyers and sellers in their formal exchanges to qualify goods and negotiate prices. Consequently, the methodological potential of the economy of qualities resides in the strategic significance of food as a product with its own career. This career is constructed via a process of qualifications and requalifications through the active participation of social actors rather than via a normative and passive point of view.

Social actors generate relations that make them qualify different kinds of products through a reflective process. In other words, retailers and consumers are scanning the quality of goods using their own commoditised and non-commoditised factors. These factors guide and assist heterogeneous assemblages to orient consumption and determine the quality of a commodity. These reflective interactions around quality are acting as relevant points of reference to organise the encounter between buyers and sellers (Callon and Muniesa 2005).

## Setting the Scene of Social Interactions:

### The Context of Fresh Fruit and Vegetables in Argentina

In order to introduce the reader to the complex world of quality, this section describes the commoditised and non-commoditised factors that buyers and sellers take into account to negotiate quality at the BACWM. Even though Argentina shows a rich variety of fresh fruit and vegetable production, the dramatic decrease in consumption makes quality become an important social element that reorganises fresh fruit and vegetable distribution.

Argentina's production areas of fresh fruit and vegetables are diverse. Since the country's geographical position (about 3,900 km of longitude range), it is affected by a wide range of climates and landscapes in which a great heterogeneity of fresh products is cultivated (Map 7.1). However, some types of fresh fruit and vegetables – particularly tropical products – are imported from neighbouring countries, such as bananas from Ecuador and Bolivia and pineapples from Brazil, whereas others are imported from European countries. Fresh fruit and vegetables have an important role both as trade products (pear, apple, citrus, garlic, onion) and as important sources of employment, since substantial labour is required in vegetable production. More than 90% of fresh vegetables are produced and sold within localised domestic markets, while 62% of fresh fruits are used in industrial activities (wine, juice, pulp and essential oil). It is worth noting that the fresh fruit and vegetable industry contributes to the national export with a value of 1,800 million dollars, which represented 3.2% of the total value of Argentinean exports in 2007 (INDEC 2008, Viteri and Ghezán 2006).

Fresh fruit and vegetables play an important role both as trade products (pear, apple, citrous, garlic, onion) and as important sources of employment, since substantial labour inputs are required in vegetable production. More than 90% of fresh vegetables are produced and sold within localised domestic markets, while 62% of fresh fruits are used in industrial activities (wine, juice, pulp and essential oil). It is worth noting that the fresh fruit and vegetable industry contributes to the national export with a value of 1,800 million dollars, which represented 3.2% of the total value of Argentinean exports in 2007 (INDEC 2008, Viteri and Ghezán 2006).

The last Census of Agriculture (INDEC 2003a) determined that the area cultivated with fresh fruits is 544,214 hectares and the area cultivated with vegetables is 229,600 hectares. Only 1.3% of the vegetable area is under greenhouse plastic covers. Fresh fruit and vegetables represented 3% of the total cultivated area in 2002 in Argentina. From 1997 to 2007, the annual average produce of fresh fruits was 7.7 millions tons while vegetables amounted to 5 million tons. In addition, the production of fruits has maintained its volume, whereas the production of vegetables has diminished considerably, both in area tonage. In Buenos Aires, the area of vegetable production decreased by 36% from 2001 to 2005 (CFI 2001, MAA 2005). This downward trend can be explained by climatic anomalies, but also by the fact

that producers shifted to more profitable and generic crops, such as soybean. It seems that the international prices paid for soybean have favoured the change, and this legume has thus displaced fresh vegetable cultivation in historical horticultural areas (Propersi 2006). According to local growers, fruit and vegetable production in Argentina is deeply affected by a chronic shortage of labour (Interviews P11-29, 49-a). This shortage has been solved partially by Bolivian immigration. Bolivians are increasingly involved as small vegetable producers, sometimes in partnership with local people around the main Argentinean urban green belts. Bolivians represent 30% of fresh vegetable growers in the Buenos Aires green-belt zone (MAA 2005).

Fruit production is developed throughout almost the whole the country, according to the different and specific agroecological conditions of each province. Some fruits provide identity to geographical regions (Map 7.1): for example, the Cuyo Region is the main supplier of grapes and peaches; North Patagonia and Cuyo are the main producers of pears and apples; and the North East and the North West provide citrous fruits such as lemon, orange, and grapefruit. Potato and onion are mainly produced in the Pampeana Region (Buenos Aires and Córdoba); tomato in the Pampeana Region and the North West; pepper in the Pampeana Region, the North East, and the North West; and garlic in Cuyo (Viteri and Ghezán 2006).

During the 1990s, the vegetable industry improved its production by the incorporation of technological innovations, essentially applied to the production process (new varieties, ferti-irrigation, and greenhouses). These innovations are currently carried out mainly at large market gardens. In the particular case of the Buenos Aires green belt (MAA 2005), these large growers represent only 8% of the total number of vegetable producers, concentrating more than 62% of the total area cultivated with vegetables in Buenos Aires.

## *Map 7.1 Argentinean Geographical Regions: Fresh Fruit and Vegetables*


*Source: based on www.sagpya.mecon.gov.ar*

Large vegetable growers follow quality standards and are constantly requiring private technical advice to improve production. These producers mainly sell their products directly to supermarkets or they have their own stalls (selling points) at the BACWM. Nevertheless, the remaining 92% of growers have variable degrees of technology and heterogeneous levels of market strategies. More than 55% of Buenos Aires's fresh produce is commercialised by middlemen who collect fresh vegetables from different small market gardens in order to distribute them through wholesale markets or individual warehouses. Besides market gardens, there are small-scale gardens destined to complement family diet.[47]

According to the national production, the main products arriving at the BACWM have their own seasonality, which impacts directly on the formation of price and the construction of quality (see Table 7.1).

***Table 7.1. Main Fruit and Vegetable Seasonality at the BACWM***

| | J | F | M | A | M | J | J | A | S | O | N | D |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Potato | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Tomato | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Orange | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Onion | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Apple | | | | | | | | | | | | |

| | Abundant supply | | Regular supply | | Limited or no supply |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|

*SOURCE: Based on Fernández Lozano (2008).*

In general, the Argentinean domestic market of fresh produce is well supplied throughout the year. Despite the relative abundance of supply, prices vary throughout the months because of the temporary shortage (of some fruits or vegetables) associated with weather adversities and logistical problems. These aspects are taken into account by buyers and sellers at the moment of purchase. Consequently, these elements go beyond market calculation (cf. Barry 2002) of prices and quantities. A commercial transaction involves the buyer's knowledge, skills, tacit understandings, criteria for buying, and his/her particular relationship with vendors.

[47] Most of these family gardens are part of a programme called Pro-Huerta, co-ordinated by the National Institute of Agricultural Technology (INTA) established in 1990. In order to alleviate poverty, the programme aims at helping people to produce fresh fruit and vegetables themselves. The programme is responsible for the distribution of seeds and other devices to more than three million people (INTA 2009).

## Consumption of Fresh Products

According to Aguirre (2005), the increased poverty of the Argentinean population is the main reason of the fall in the consumption of fresh fruit and vegetables observed in the last years. It is worth mentioning that 51.7% of the population in the metropolitan area of Buenos Aires lives below the poverty threshold (INDEC 2003b). This can imply reduced access to fresh fruit and vegetables in their diet.

By taking into account different statistical data (CONADE 1965, INDEC 1988, 1998a) of the metropolitan area of Buenos Aires, Aguirre (2005) concludes that the consumption of these products has positive income elasticity. This means that when family salary diminishes, the acquisition of fresh fruit and vegetables is reduced. Table 7.2 shows the decrease in consumption of fruit and vegetables throughout the last 40 years.

***Table 7.2. Fresh Produce Family Consumption (kilo/person/year)***

| 1965 | 1985 | 1996 |
|---|---|---|
| 140.3 | 110.5 | 92.8 |

*SOURCE: Based on Aguirre (2005).*

Despite the lack of current statistics and other information or specifications related to the kinds of fresh produce consumed, Aguirre (2005) makes an effort to analyse consumption and shows that families reduced their consumption of fresh fruit and vegetables by 34% during 1965–1996. This reduction means that Argentineans do not achieve the basic level of 140 kilos/person/year recommended for a balanced diet by the World Health Organization.

Although Aguirre (2005) supports the idea that the consumption of fresh produce is directly linked to purchasing power, it seems that other social aspects are influenced by consumer habits. According to Fernández Lozano (2008), Argentineans have recently started to appreciate quality and nutritional value of fresh produce. However, the criterion of saving time on buying and preparing food prevails over searching for quality. These preferences are linked to a broader change in consumption habits. For instance, the increasing number of women working away from home has led to a shorter time to prepare food. In addition, this tendency favours the development of the food service sector (bars, restaurants, institutional food services, and fast-food places) particularly in large urban areas.

Even though there are discontinuities in the increases in these ways of consuming as a result of different economic crises, wealthy consumers continue to buy ‘fresh cuts’ such as ready-to-eat salads and other minimally processed fresh fruit and vegetable products (Viteri 2003). In addition, the preferences for dairy products have prevailed against the consumption of

fresh fruit and vegetables. Advertising and the attractive packaging of dairy products capture consumer demand for yogurts and desserts. The transportability of dairy products offers advantages for their massive consumption over fresh fruit and vegetables. Dairy products do not need to be washed, peeled or cooked. These factors lead people to prefer them in their everyday routines.

Despite these changes in consumption habits, Table 7.3 shows that Argentineans still prefer to buy fresh fruit and vegetables at specialised shops rather than at supermarkets (INDEC 1998b, 2009). The reasons for this preference are proximity of shops, quality, competitive price, freshness, and the vendor's knowledge and advice to consume fresh fruit and vegetables. These elements encompass information and communicative dimensions, usually defined as providing good service to consumers.

***Table 7.3. Food Argentinean Consumption by acquisition's place 1996/1997***

| | *Total* | *Supermarket* | *Specialised Shop* | *Others* |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| *Foods & drinks* | *100* | *25.53* | *66.75* | *7.72* |
| *Bakery* | *100* | *15.23* | *80.20* | *4.57* |
| *Flours, rice, cereals and pastes* | *100* | *37.97* | *58.66* | *3.38* |
| *Meat (bovine, pig, ovine)* | *100* | *21.16* | *75.89* | *2.95* |
| *Meat (chicken)* | *100* | *28.46* | *67.06* | *4.48* |
| *Fish & seafood* | *100* | *21.35* | *70.80* | *7.84* |
| *Cold meat (bacon, ham, etc)* | *100* | *42.36* | *54.82* | *2.82* |
| *Oils & fats* | *100* | *48.02* | *49.28* | *2.71* |
| *Milk* | *100* | *30.45* | *63.64* | *5.91* |
| *Milk products* | *100* | *46.16* | *51.02* | *2.82* |
| *Fruits* | *100* | *22.96* | *71.35* | *5.68* |
| *Vegetables* | *100* | *22.32* | *72.61* | *5.07* |

*Source: INDEC (2002)*

People who like buying fresh fruit and vegetables at street markets (twice a week) are attracted to the freshness and seasonal quality of the products. Aulicino and Moré (2000) classify these consumers as 'traditional' since they still buy fresh produce that requires time to buy and prepare. However, consumers today are reorganising their practices and combining 'traditional' and 'modern' ways of buying and consuming, so it is not unusual that a person in Buenos Aires sometimes purchases fresh fruit and vegetables at

supermarkets and at other times at the nearest greengrocer's. These combinations are part of heterogeneous assemblages of production and consumption where quality is an important factor in the organisation and circulation of fresh products. In the following section, we will illustrate the issues through actors who strive to establish a national quality standard.

## Controlling Quality or Controlling the Market?

The case below is linked to the quality control requirements at the laboratory of the BACWM. This laboratory follows the quality criteria emanated from the national legal framework of the National Agri-food Health and Quality Service (SE.NA.SA.). However, some private actors (supermarkets, fast-food chains, large producers) assume a lack of national regulations. Therefore, they are constantly trying to impose their own quality assurance standards.

In Argentina, the National Agri-food Health and Quality Service (SE.NA.SA.) has the responsibility to assure the health and quality of fresh produce from farm production to retail distribution. There are official norms that describe different requirements of packaging and visual attributes according to different levels of quality (SAG 1983a, b, c).

As described in Chapter 5, the national government implemented a fresh fruit and vegetable production and distribution control system (SI.CO.F.HOR.) in 2001. This national programme promotes the application of good agricultural practices (GAP) in order to guarantee safe fresh fruit and vegetables to consumers (SE.NA.SA. 2001). Consequently, the BACWM laboratory is in charge of controlling the quality of the fresh produce sold at this marketplace by following SE.NA.SA. requirements.

Despite the national legal framework, certain social practices seem to work outside of the state's quality and safety control. For instance, other wholesale markets operating at the Buenos Aires metropolitan area (see Chapter 5) do not have facilities to allow authorities to examine pesticide remains or microbiological contamination in leaf vegetables. They do not use the BACWM's quality service to control their products. Although supermarkets use the BACWM's quality service occasionally, they are obliged by the National Agri-food Health and Quality Service (SE.NA.SA.) and National Secretary of Agriculture, Livestock, Fisheries and Food (SAGPyA) to hire qualified personnel to assure safe fresh produce on their shelves (Interview 14).

Little sanitary control within fresh fruit and vegetable distribution does not seem to be a point of conflict to retailers and wholesalers. A study at the BACWM (Aulicino et al. 2000) shows that buyers do not choose to buy at this particular marketplace because of its laboratory and its sanitary control. It would seem that each buyer takes the health aspects as given. Wholesalers and growers interviewed minimise the effect of pesticide remains on consumers' health. They are not interested in knowing that biological effects of chemicals accumulate over time and that the hazard to the individual may

depend on the sum of the exposure received throughout her/his life (Carson [1962] 2000). The danger is easily ignored from growers to consumers. A wholesaler interviewed says: 'I'm already 63 years old and I have never heard of anyone dying from consuming vegetables' (Interview L3-2).

The case of the 'national quality standard for avocados' illustrates the role of national quality standards in the reorganisation of fresh fruit and vegetable circulation. There is a tension between growers linked with global commercialisation and homogeneous quality standards and growers who still sell their products in the domestic market because they do not achieve international quality standards. However, the latter seem to contribute to preserving biodiversity and local knowledge (cf. Wiskerke 2009).

During the 1980s, a group of three innovative entrepreneurs developed a new variety of avocado in the North West region of the country. In 1997, these growers created a local association and then organised the National Avocado Producers Association in 2002 (Ignoto and Figueroa 2007). This association started to export avocados through Chile to Europe. These highly organised growers asked the Secretary of Agriculture, Livestock, Fisheries and Food (SAGPyA) to change the official quality protocol for avocados from visual examination to credence and objective attributes (i.e. dry matter).

This private objectification of avocado quality, geared to homogenise a national standard according to accepted international criteria, generated social and political interactions between public and private actors, creating the material conditions for confrontation, co-operation and delay in establishing an national register for avocados. Apparently, this register was a central step in the process of quality branding to officially represent the excellent characteristics of Argentinean avocados. The visualisation and legitimisation of these avocado attributes were presented as an important measure to promote export and to secure a niche in the international market (Arce and Viteri 2009).

The SAGPyA (2008), interested in improving quality standards to gain export markets, and the association of avocado producers, interested in doing business, joined forces to 'create order in avocado production' in Argentina. However, medium-size and small producers interpreted this turn to quality as a political move to eliminate them from the national market. This interpretation gained force when policy-makers and large producers characterised the medium and small sector as disorganised competitors (Interviews 14-b, 37-f). A controversy over the social and market significance of avocado quality led to a series of struggles between different producers, business interests and policy-makers. In this way, the avocado quality initiative became a policy arena characterised by a disagreement over whose interest quality represented.

By observing the practices of small and medium-size growers, it is possible to suggest that they were not convinced of the efficacy of a national quality standard for avocados to create order in the quality of the fruit for the domestic market. They claimed that avocado quality was a political alliance

to establish a norm that was expensive and bureaucratic as well as a vertical form of control. They argued that this new norm favoured export sector interests rather than national avocado production and Argentinean consumers. Their argument stressed that large producers and policy-makers wanted to promote only the variety of avocados sold abroad ('global quality'). This meant that everyone should improve their production and use expensive technology. The certification of quality was presented as a total reorganisation of the avocado sector and large producers were the group to take the production of avocados away from medium and small producers to favour distant and global interests. Another point of contention was over the importance of avocado diversity, which meant keeping different prices and perceptions of quality among producers, retailers and consumers. However, large growers strived to replace this diversity by using the abstract and socially disembodied attribution of quality developed by laboratory experts. Although the association of large avocado growers finally delivered an official national avocado standard, this quality criterion failed to stop medium and small avocado producers from selling their produce. Hence, it was not long until the National Avocado Producers Association started to complain that it was necessary to legally stop the commercial circulation of 'unofficial' quality avocados. This was a precondition to improve and manage the quality of the Argentinean avocado. According to the association of large avocado producers, they were subjected to unfair competition (Ignoto and Figueroa 2007) and this was against the technological improvement and capital investment of responsible producers like them, who were striving to compete in the global market.

Both medium and small producers, as well as an important group of retailers, believed that keeping a diversity of avocados in the market allowed different consumers to have access to a portfolio of avocados, which in turn benefited different lifestyles (cf. Wiskerke 2009). The result is that today there are different quality grades of avocados in the BACWM. Despite the establishment of the national avocado quality standard, a large variety of avocados is being sold. This opens up the question what contribution this kind of programme for a national quality standard can make for the well-being and consumption of the local population.

The controversy about 'avocado quality' represents the ways of manoeuvring between different social actors attempting to resolve their everyday problems through the issue of quality standards. This is an illustration of a contemporary tension between the global and the national commodity processes. While large producers – keen to trade and to achieve global quality standards – push authorities towards homogenising a particular criterion of quality, small and medium producers generate a diverse and affordable quality according to their everyday lives. We can thus conclude that any attempt to standardise quality may become a public issue. Food quality is socially constructed by different interests, knowledge and practices, and it is important to elucidate and analyse its social and political implications. In

addition, it seems that defining only one quality standard can leave some varieties out of the market, thus decreasing diversity.

## Buyers at the BACWM

This section attempts to illustrate quality as an element of organisation. Buyers and sellers at the BACWM are constantly exchanging information and knowledge in order to diminish uncertainties, such as the heterogeneous degrees of quality of fresh fruit and vegetables (Akerlof 1970). In order to introduce the reader into this world of quality, primary and secondary data are used to describe buyers according to their behaviours.

Buyers at the BACWM constitute a heterogeneous group. Aulicino et al. (2000) analysed and characterised 535 buyers who go to this marketplace with their own means of transport. Many of them (53%) drive old pick-up trucks with less than 1 ton of load capacity, 70% of these buyers own a greengrocer's in Buenos Aires city, whereas 21% distribute, buy and select fresh produce to their own customers. The remaining are assemblers, who offer transport services to greengrocers. While some of them acquire an average of 25 boxes[48] per visit (370 kilos), others buy more than 100 boxes (1,500 kilos). These buyers visit the BACWM two or three times a week, preferring Friday (34.8%) and Monday (29.6%). Even though the BACWM is the only source of supply for most of the buyers (85.2%), some buy vegetables in other wholesale markets because of freshness.[49] Buyers' preference for the BACWM is linked to competitive prices, variety of supplies, quality and opening hours. They also consider that the facilities at the BACWM, such as the parking lot, the cleaning and the flow of merchandise, are quite satisfactory. It is worth noting that only 1.4% of the 535 cases analysed consider the sanitary and quality control to be an important element to prefer the BACWM over other marketplaces (Aulicino et al. 2000).

In order to complement these secondary data, 180 interviews were carried out in November and December 2006. Despite the heterogeneity observed in buyers, the wholesalers or vendors interviewed distinguish the buyers (i.e. their customers) according to their volume demands (Figure 7.1).

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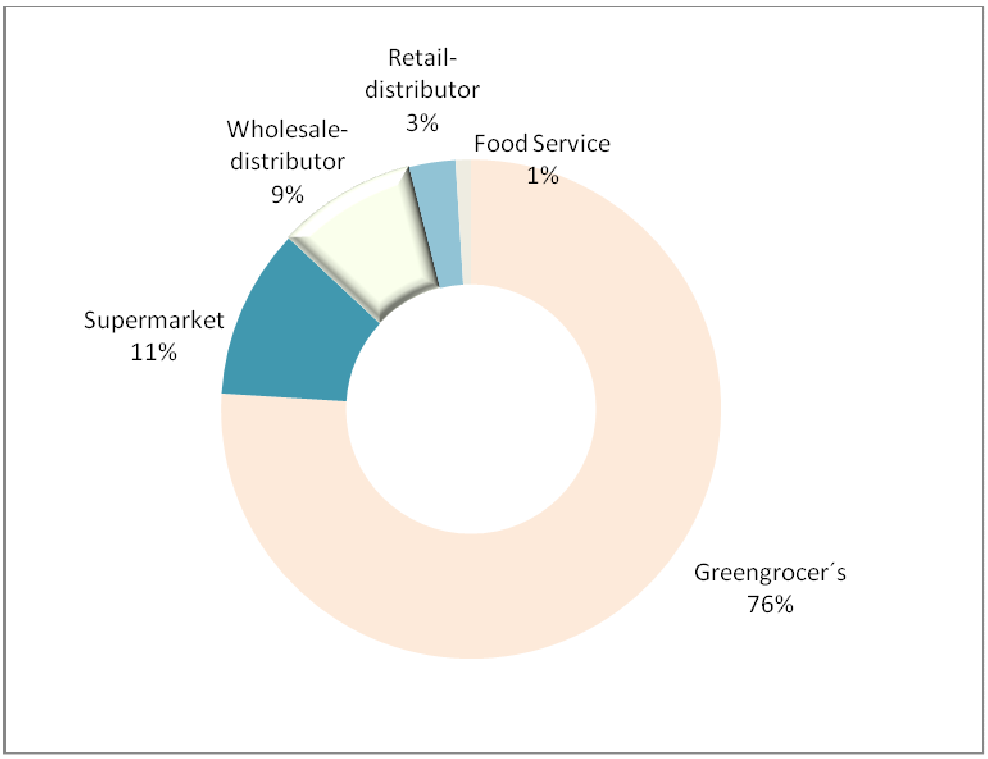
[48] A box is the unit of measurement that everybody uses in fresh fruit and vegetable commercialisation. This is an ambiguous measurement that implies boxes ranging from 4 to 20 kilos. In order to convert boxes into kilos, an average of the size of the boxes of the main products sold at the BACWM (14.75 kilos) was used.

[49] Freshness is linked to opening hours. Most of the other marketplaces work during the night, selling vegetables that were harvested in the evening. Consequently, vegetables conserve their natural freshness.

***Figure 7.1 Wholesalers' main customers***




*SOURCE: Wholesalers interviewed at the BACWM in 2006.*

The most important group of buyers at the BACWM is made up by greengrocers (76%), followed by supermarkets (11%). Although large supermarkets buy directly from growers, supermarket procurement officers contact specialised wholesalers for specific products at the BACWM (see Chapter 6). Thus, specialised wholesalers need to contact other wholesalers in order to satisfy supermarket demand. About 11% of the wholesalers interviewed consider themselves direct (74%) or indirect (26%) suppliers of supermarket. The third group of important customers are the wholesale distributors. The wholesale distributors are secondary market handlers such as jobbers and purveyors. They are in charge of supplying fresh fruit and vegetables to other wholesalers or warehouses situated in country towns or villages without wholesale markets. These secondary market handlers are appreciated customers because they buy a considerable amount of products in each transaction.

Other middlemen who buy fresh fruit and vegetables at the BACWM are the retail distributors. They supply products to different kinds of retailers, from small supermarkets to greengrocers. Retail distributors can thus either be specialised in quality and variety of products or only distribute fresh produce with a normal quality standard. Some of them also distribute fresh produce to restaurants or hotels, such as large fast-food places with high logistic and quality requirements.

A few wholesalers are specialised in supplying food service or institutions such as military and primary schools, prisons, factories, hospitals, etc. In order to become a supplier of these institutions, wholesalers have to launch a public bid and compete with other suppliers. Once they are selected, they sign a contract agreeing to supply the institutional canteen for one or two years.

These different types of customers collaborate in order to increase the heterogeneity of quality demands. In addition, there is a complex variability within each group. For instance, wholesalers classify greengrocers into different groups according to nationality or behaviour. Wholesalers interviewed (10%) argue that Bolivians have increased their participation as retailers in the last 10 yeas. They characterise Bolivians as customers who buy a considerable amount of products and pay in cash. Although Bolivians are very desirable clients, some wholesalers have xenophobic opinions about them (see Chapter 5). While some vendors criticise Bolivian retailers because they look for brands and check each fresh produce box before buying, showing that they 'know nothing about fresh fruit and vegetables' (Interview 07-54), other vendors believe that these customers do so in order to avoid misunderstandings (Interviews 09-40, 04-42, L1-14). However, everybody agrees that they prefer Bolivians to supermarkets because Bolivians pay in cash.

Buyers who snap up merchandise at the last moment of the commercial day are called '*barre fondos*' (pool sweepers), since they select on price rather than quality. Although wholesalers need this kind of buyer, one of them has a poster on one of the walls of his stall saying: 'the one who looks for prices never gets quality'. Wholesalers recognise that nowadays it is more difficult to find '*barre fondos*', since most of the customers prefer to buy good quality and fight for a competitive price.

In the particular case of the BACWM, wholesalers almost always know and maintain face to face relationships with their suppliers and customers. Wholesalers can sell different qualities and services according to customer demand and to their supplies in this marketplace. Where variation in quality is considerable, wholesalers use different strategies such as guarantees and personal alliances between suppliers and customers in order to diminish uncertainty (cf. Akerlof 1970). For instance, some vendors are responsible for the sale of merchandise to their customers over a particular period of time. It means buyers can put in a claim when the products they bought arrived in bad condition at their shops. Thus, we can say that wholesalers sell not only fresh fruit and vegetables but also their prestige as entrepreneurs, since they refund customers in case their products were not in good condition (Chamberlin 1948 [1933]). These strategies are followed by numerous wholesalers who use both market and personal relations in order to negotiate the best price according to the quality of the fresh produce. It seems that wholesalers generate an economy of variability interweaving heterogeneous production and commerce practices, while supermarkets impose a homogeneous circulation of fresh produce (de Raymond 2007: 197).

Wholesalers link quality with commoditised aspects such as volume of products at the moment of purchase. When there is a shortage of a particular product, vendors always reserve boxes for their 'loyal' customers (cf. Cook et al. 2005). As mentioned before, since quality is a negotiated process, retailers have the right to return merchandise or ask for a refund. This practice is also used as a means of knowing each other. While customers take advantage of refunds, wholesalers reduce their willingness to negotiate. However, buyers also select their suppliers by trial and error, looking for growers rather than wholesalers who consign 100% of their supply. This social behaviour shows that buyers and sellers at the BACWM are no longer able to become strangers (cf. Callon 1986, Callon 1998a).

Calculation is seen as a process where social actors attempt to face uncertainties through interaction at a marketplace. This concept differs from neoclassical rational individuals who choose goods without being influenced by the social context. Social actors spend their time renegotiating their contracts, interacting and exchanging information in order to face uncertainties (Callon 1998a).

According to Miller (2002), the qualification and requalification of goods can be understood through ethnographic studies, since neither the buyers and sellers involved nor the academics are faced by 'abstract' markets, as economists strive to explain. Thus, the following two sections attempt to create space not only for a diversity of modes of quality 'calculation' developed by social actors in a market exchange context, but also for the contradictory and multiple framings developed around an economy of qualities (cf. Slater 2002).

## Quality as a Social Organisation: Greengrocers and Wholesalers

Interactions between greengrocers and wholesalers generate an organisational dynamic that contributes to the distribution of fresh products. These interactions are potentially innovative in nature and promote the exchange of knowledge, entrepreneurship and different quality circuits. Greengrocers are one of the critical points of heterogeneous consumers with dissimilar income levels, social interests and values. The ethnographic description of greengrocers' everyday practices allows depicting the social dimension of quality more adequately. To illustrate these points, this section presents four case-studies (see Pictures 7.1 – 7.4). The four cases selected were recommended by wholesalers or customers who argue that the owners of these greengrocers are professionals in the way they select and offer fresh produce. A wholesaler refers to this kind of greengrocers as follows:

> 'Some of my clients know how to buy. When fresh pepper is in its high season, it is cheap; he (Case-study 2) buys the good ones at $1.30/kilo and he sells at $1.80/kilo. He doesn't make a big difference, but sells a lot of products. Of course, he is a lucky guy since his greengrocer's is situated in a very crowded place. Mr. G

started selling fruits in the street. So, he knows what he is looking for. He buys according to his customers' budgets and needs.'

'I have other customers who buy only first quality since they distribute fresh produce to greengrocers situated in a high-income neighbourhood (distributor of Case-study 3). For instance, they distribute to greengrocers at markets such as Del Progreso.[50] There, greengrocers offer a variety of imported and exotic fruits and services (cut vegetables, fruit salads, etc.). These greengrocers know that their customers are used to buying high quality goods. So, they offer very expensive fresh produce.' (Interview 4, 10 April 2007).

This wholesaler's comment shows how greengrocers manage to combine commoditised (economic transactions) and non-commoditised (knowledge, long-term relations, passion, information, etc.) elements during transaction processes in order to satisfy their customers and make profits. This ability can be summarised by their economic characteristics. So, the following table shows differences between the selected case-studies by volume handled.

***Table 7.4. Socio-Economic Characteristics of Retailers Selected***

| Case-Study | Beginnings | Volume handled (boxes/week) | Employees | Customer target |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **1** | 1990 | 2,500 | 23 | High-income |
| **2** | 2003 (1977) | 710 | 4 | Low-income |
| **3** | 2002 (1964) | 500 | 3 | High-income |
| **4** | 1999 | 350 | 1 | Middle-income |

*Source: Information based on interviews and participant observation.*

As explained before, the data of the above table are given in boxes rather than kilos in order to avoid ambiguous measurements. Boxes are different depending on the products. For instance, a box of tomatoes can weigh between 12 and 18 kilos or a box of apples between 4 and 20 kilos. However, these ambiguities seem not to be a problem among people involved in fresh fruit and vegetable distribution. It represents tacit knowledge that can be used as an entrance barrier to new buyers who are beginners at fresh fruit and vegetable commercialisation.

[50] Del Progreso Market is an old and historical retail market, which opened in 1889. Among different stalls of imported and national food, there are vegetable and fruit stalls (6 and 3 respectively) characterised by good quality and high price (http://www.mercadodelprogreso.com.ar).

Case-study 1 is clearly different from the rest of the cases, not only because it commercialises more volume, but also because it commercialises 100% of its products by delivery. To this end, the company employs 10 telephone operators and 10 delivery men. The other three greengrocers belong to large shops (Ghezán et al. 1997),[51] offering different qualities of fresh fruit and vegetables according to their customers' socio-economic levels. In order to know how buyers and sellers exchange information and negotiate quality, the four greengrocers were followed during their purchasing processes.

## Case-study 1

Case-study 1 is a small firm conducted by an innovative entrepreneur who started delivering high quality fresh produce to homes in May 1990. The enterprise is situated 60 km from Buenos Aires city and delivers to a large geographical area (Picture 7.1). At present, the firm has expanded to other products beyond fresh fruit and vegetables, such as flowers, meats, artisan cheeses, fresh fish, ham, olive oil, conserves and aromatics. It offers the possibility to receive specially selected food, pre-washed and packaged for optimal conservation. It also assures freshness and higher quality and hygiene of their products and production's processes. For instance, in order to offer a tomato with flavour they produce the variety Camone in their own greenhouses. Through their web page, they explain how to eat and conserve this variety to appreciate its taste.

This enterprise was started by a young agronomist. Mr. Q belongs to a middle-class family who used to have their own garden in the 1980s. He learnt to enjoy fresh and good quality vegetables during summer-time, but avoided consumption during winter because of the huge differences in quality and price. While Mr. Q was at university, he understood that offering good quality of fresh fruit and vegetables throughout the year would be an interesting market niche to develop. So, he started offering deliveries to his friends and relatives with the slogan of what a pleasure it is to have fresh fruit and vegetables on his table from his own garden. By word of mouth other people became customers. Nowadays the enterprise offers more than 2,000 deliveries a week, of more than 2,500 boxes of fresh fruit and vegetables among other products.

### ▪The Everyday Routine of Quality

**Mr. Q** and Luis (his 34-year-old employee) go to the market three times a week, leaving home at 5 AM. While Luis drives the van, Mr. Q checks the list of more or less 10 products that they need to buy at the BACWM. Although they collect products directly from market gardens (50% of this firm's fresh fruit and vegetable supply), they complement their demand by buying at the

[51] Ghezán et al. (1997) classify greengrocers as small (shops that supply less than 200 boxes a week) and large (more than 200 boxes/week).

BACWM. During the journey, Mr. Q phones different wholesalers and asks about available quality and quantity. Since he knows that there are problems with the production of potatoes, he asks one of their suppliers to keep some bags for him. He is constantly in contact with growers and his telephone operators. The latter inform him of the exact quantities needed according to their customers' orders.

***Picture 7.1. Greengrocer´s: case-study 1***


*Source: Website of the case-study 1*

Before going to the BACWM, they visit the Buenos Aires flower market since they also offer flowers through their web page. They arrive at the BACWM at 7 AM. Luis parks the small new van and gives some coins to the young man who keeps an eye on the parked vehicles. They organise the visit to three different pavilions. First, they look for potatoes and contact the wholesalers who kept some bags for them, since there is a shortage of this product on this particular day. After checking the quality they decide to buy. Potatoes are the only products they buy immediately since there is a shortage. Then they go to other stalls and sample an orange to check its flavour. Although they do not

stop in each stall for more than 5 or 10 minutes, they spend as much as 5 hours buying products at the BACWM. During this time they constantly compare products and stalls according to quality, price and origin.

While Luis pays for the merchandise and checks the quality of the boxes already bought, Mr. Q gives prices by mobile phone to his employees at the office. Five years ago, Luis did this activity without Mr. Q. Both like the new way of buying, since they can share doubts and divide tasks. Each of them is specialised in tasks according to their own background. Luis has worked at a market garden since he was 16 years old. Consequently, he knows the environment and language of wholesaling very well. While Mr. Q is starting to get used to the environment, Luis feels free chatting and fighting for good price and quality, using the BACWM's typical jargon.

Learning by experience is part of everyday life at the BACWM. For instance, while they buy, Luis points at a potato bag of the Villa Dolores (Córdoba) brand, which is also the name of a geographical region preferred by greengrocers. But Luis knows that these bags come from another geographical region. The brand-name on the bag is a fantasy name that can confuse newcomer buyers or inexperts like the researcher. This simple observation demonstrates the important role that tacit knowledge plays to do good business at the BACWM.

The example of this brand of potatoes can be useful to explain how images are involved in commercial transactions. Beyond the anecdote of using the name of the well-known geographical region, while in fact the potatoes are brought in from the South East of Buenos Aires, there is also a criterion of quality involved in this brand manipulation. Mosciaro (2009) argues that, although there is an official standard (SAG 1983b) that classifies potatoes by different degrees of quality and size, it seems that other elements influence the price of potatoes at the BACWM. There is a preference for potatoes originating in the North (Córdoba, Mendoza) because of their external appearance. However, price differentiation is also related to seasonality. In other words, official standards are not taken into account by sellers and buyers. They take into account only appearance, showing that potato consumers prioritise appearance over other attributes in Argentina. This can be different for other fresh fruit and vegetables, such as tomatoes or melons, where taste is more important.

The case of potatoes shows that although it is easy to start a fresh fruit and vegetable business, knowing about quality takes its time. Thus, it is important to create strong relationships with wholesalers in order to improve knowledge and increase self-confidence. Nevertheless, these relationships are dynamic and susceptible to break-ups. This was the case between Mr. Q's enterprise and a medium-size wholesaler. During the 2001 economic crisis, Mr. Q had to stop paying many wholesalers. They resumed to pay once they started to recover. Nevertheless, one of these wholesalers –according to Luis – treated them very badly and they decided not to pay and not to buy fresh produce from his stall anymore. This kind of relationship is part of the fresh fruit and vegetable business at the BACWM, showing that commercial transactions go

beyond profit interests. These discontinuities in relationships show again that interactions between buyers and sellers involve multiple elements that go beyond economic interests.

## Case-Study 2

The second case is an eye-catching greengrocer's at a busy railway station in a low-income area (Picture 7.2). As shown before, one of the wholesalers at the BACWM defines him as 'an expert in fresh fruit and vegetables'. This opinion is linked probably to **Mr. G**'s beginnings as a street vendor. He remembers that employees in the municipality pursued him since this activity was forbidden by law. In spite of this and of his feelings as a '*ciruja*' (scavenger), he used to wear his best clothes in order to sell there and to sell more in those days than now.

***Picture 7.2. Greengrocer´s: case-study 2***


*Source: MLV*

Mr. G is always at the cash-register desk in his shop, while his employees are attending customers. When he goes out to buy at wholesale markets, he leaves the cash register to one of his employees and his wife later controls the activity. Mr. G considers that it is very important to sell in a good atmosphere. So, he organises barbecues when he does not have to go to the BACWM. On the second floor of the shop they have a small kitchen, since the greengrocer's is open 24 hours a day. Although Mr. G has a partner, he is the only responsible person for supplying the shop and deciding prices.

Mr. G's purchases are based on his experience, knowledge and old relationships with wholesalers. He buys fruits mainly at the BACWM, but also goes to a Bolivian wholesale market for fresh and good-quality vegetables. Mr. G follows his own routine, visiting five of the 12 pavilions at the BACWM. He starts buying at 12 PM and contacts some vendors. Before coming to the BACWM, Mr. G has already phoned some of them, so vendors know what Mr. G is looking for. He stops at one stall, touches some oranges, and has the following conversation with a vendor:

> Vendor: 'We need to wait for 15 days for a high season of oranges. I can reduce the price that I've already told you by phone. Of course, I can offer you other oranges, cheaper than these ones, but the quality is totally different. Do you want to try?'
>
> Mr. G: 'No, thanks. I don't need to taste merchandise. Greengrocers try because they are starving. Give me 19 boxes of oranges and 59 boxes of tangerines' (Field note 56, 10 April 2007).

While Mr. G is looking at the oranges, the vendor knows that his customer is a frequent and expert buyer and he appreciates the quantity of products that he always buys from him. The price needs to be negotiated. According to the orange vendor, the quality is not perfect yet. Nevertheless, they will set a price taking into account that it is noon already and the vendor needs to do business. So, multiple factors are involved in the context of the transaction. Besides, from Mr. G's point of view tasting products is a sign of ignorance, since experience gives you the possibility to recognise quality by the identification and the certainty of the eye. However, he tries a kiwi before buying, since according to his experience he had bought acidic ones in his last purchase. Thus, Mr. G uses his taste and experience to methodically decide which products he likes to buy. He says: 'If I like these products, my customers will buy them'.

He continues buying and chatting with other wholesalers. They exchange information and share doubts. Mr. G has already bought tomatoes at a good price, but he is wondering whether he did a good deal or not. So, he tells the story to a wholesaler who immediately gives him the stall number where he bought some tomatoes. Although the BACWM is a huge place, vendors with experience are aware of the different qualities. The exchange of this kind of information is given as a 'gift', in order to build customers' trust. For instance, in this purchase Mr. G was advised by a vendor not to buy pears from one of the stalls since they were very bad quality. However, Mr. G has

his own tools to select quality at the BACWM. He points out that 'fresh fruit and vegetables tell you how they are, by their size, form, brightness, colour, texture or visual defects'.

Mr. G knows that his customers cannot afford prime quality commodities since his greengrocer's is in a low-income neighbourhood. So, he tries to avoid buying at stalls with high-quality offers. Nevertheless, he gets angry listening to a wholesaler and grower saying that the BACWM gets the rubbish left-overs of exportation (implying that the prime quality products are sent abroad or to supermarkets). Mr. G, proud of his profession, answers:

> 'So, are we [the greengrocers] stupid buying rubbish? I sell a kilo of pears at $2.5 in my shop. And it is like sirloin [the best meat from the lower back of a cow], isn't it? Yesterday, I passed by Carrefour [supermarket] and they were offering Williams pears at $3.29 as a sale and they probably have no taste at all.'
>
> 'I think selling fresh fruit and vegetables is the best kind of work in the world and as is coming here (BACWM). The BACWM is like a non-profit organisation. I can leave different stalls without paying. But, be careful, greengrocers are the only ones who pay in cash and supermarkets pay when they want' (Field note 56, 10 April 2007).

Although Mr. G knows that his long-term relationships constructed over the years at the BACWM allow him to leave without paying, he builds up his honour paying in cash. After selecting fresh produce, he contacts his reliable '*changarín*' (trucker). This young trucker is in charge of delivering Mr. G's purchases from the BACWM to the greengrocer's. He also controls quality before carrying boxes to the truck. Mr. G relies on his '*changarín*' since he used to work with his grandfather and father (cf. Granovetter 1983). So, he gives money to him to pay the different stalls and leaves the BACWM at 3 PM. He then drives his old car to a Bolivian wholesale market in Morón, arriving there in 40 minutes, has lunch, checks his product list and buys leaf and fresh-cut vegetables. He then returns to his shop at about 6 PM.

**Case-study 3**

This case is a greengrocer's situated in a high-income neighbourhood of Buenos Aires city. Mr. J, its owner, has been working in the fresh fruit and vegetable business since 1964. **Mr. J** came from Calabria (Italy) to Argentina in 1962. At first, he worked in a retail market with an uncle and, then, in a street market for 10 years. After that, Mr. J started working at the Mercado Del Progreso. Since he and his wife sold well, they could afford trips to Europe. In the 1980s, they brought the fresh-cut vegetable idea (minimally processed vegetables) and implemented it at their stalls in 1992.

Between 2001 and 2002, the couple and their two sons undertook a new challenge. They started a fresh-cut vegetable enterprise in order to supply supermarket demand, with their own brand (Boutique), but the enterprise

went bankrupt only one year later and the couple got divorced. Nowadays, Mr. J's wife still offers fresh-cut vegetables at their first stall and Mr. J sells fruit and vegetables in his own shop, his new greengrocer's. Mr. J himself explains what kind of service he offers:

> 'I have to say that I'm a professional greengrocer. I always say to my employees that we have to offer service, have good manners, be tidy, and smile to our customers. We open at 6 am and one hour later the phone rings since a girl who works at a neighbour's house needs oranges to make orange juice for her boss's breakfast. So, we send the delivery. Eighty per cent of our sale is by telephone, because this local shop is situated in a not very busy street' (Interview 58b, 29 March 2007).

Mr. J's greengrocer's is very attractive (Picture 7.3). His employees wear a T-shirt with the logo of the firm, and fresh produce is displayed in a decorative way in order to draw people towards the shop by the quality they sell. They also offer fresh-cut vegetables and other delicacies such as olive oil or dried fruits. There is also a butcher, but the person is not Mr. J's employee.

***Picture 7.3. Greengrocer´s: case-study 3***


*Source: MLV*

Although Mr. J used to buy at the BACWM five years ago, nowadays Mr. T (his old friend and partner) does this activity for him. Mr. T is famous at the BACWM since he buys the best quality, delivering his purchases at the most luxurious greengrocers' in Buenos Aires. Mr. T starts buying at 4 AM and finishes at 12 PM. Mr. J tells how Mr. T buys products:

> 'When he is at the BACWM, he becomes crazy. He works very efficiently. He buys between 1,000 and 1,500 boxes in each visit. Mr. T is an old generation buyer. There are few of this kind of buyers nowadays. He knows how to fight for competitive prices.'
>
> 'Five years ago I also used to buy at the BACWM. You make profit not only in the way you sell, also in the way you buy. However, you can buy a considerable amount and throw half of your purchase away because you are not a good sales person. My uncle used to tell me that it is easy to sell good quality, everybody can do that. The problem is to sell low quality merchandise. It is not easy to be a good greengrocer' (Interview 58b, 29 March 2007).

Mr. T and Mr. J are also known as innovative entrepreneurs at the BACWM. Wholesalers argue that they know how to handle fresh produce. Mr. T buys a huge amount of various levels of ripeness since he and his partners can stock merchandise in their large shops. Mr. T prefers to buy from wholesalers who offer their own produce because they offer good quality and quantity. Like any greengrocer, he always makes deals with one of the vendors at some of the stalls. Greengrocers construct particular relationships with vendors, where both parties know each other through a reflexive activity linked to quality and price negotiations (cf. Callon et al. 2002). Buyers try to have good relationships with the employees who are in charge of selecting the boxes. This is linked to the possibility of carrying on with the best quality that this stall offers on the day of the retailer's purchase. So, a quality consensus is built through social relations and fresh fruit and vegetable attributes.

**Case-study 4**

This greengrocer's, operated by **Mr. V**, is situated in a middle-income neighbourhood in Buenos Aires city. Mr. V is a young Peruvian man who is helped by his wife and an employee during rush hours. Mr. V represents part of the new generation of greengrocers in Argentina. According to a case-study in three different neighbourhoods of Buenos Aires city (Liverotti 2009), between 35% and 50% of greengrocers' are run by Bolivians or Peruvians. These young greengrocers compete with supermarkets for quality, service and price. Consumers consider them hard-working, preferring them to others because of the good quality, price and service.

Mr. V was born in Lima (Peru) in 1976. Although he has worked since he was 10 years old, he finished his primary and secondary school education. He saved money and came to Argentina in the 1990s. In the beginning, he worked as a car washer, then in a Chinese supermarket, and in the building industry.

He liked the construction work, but it was not well paid. Consequently, he started as an employee at a greengrocer's at Christmas time. Since he had to work hard and long hours, he ended up giving up the job. However, when he went to receive his last pay packet, a niece of the owner asked him for help since there were a lot people waiting to be served. Since Mr. V was a good employee, the owner asked him to stay and offered him an increment in his salary.

Five years later, Mr. V and his wife decided to open their own shop (Picture 7.4). In the beginning, Mr. V received help from his sister-in-law who also had a greengrocer's. They went to buy at the BACWM and other wholesale markets together. His sister-in-law introduced Mr. V to different wholesalers and taught him how to negotiate price and quality. Nowadays he buys more than 300 boxes per week, delivering some of them to restaurants and customers' homes. He covers his rent and expenses (light, transport, etc.) with his restaurant deliveries.

***Picture 7.4. Greengrocer´s: case-study 4***

*Source: MLV*

Although Mr. V is young and new at the fresh fruit and vegetable world, he is learning due to the advice he has received and the experience gained. First, he learnt how to buy, thanks to his sister-in-law. Then, he bought his own van and nowadays he buys fruits at the BACWM, and vegetables at another wholesale market. He uses neither the typically greengrocers' slang nor jokes about quality the way other greengrocers do. For instance, a greengrocer can ask about the lack of colour in apples: 'How is this Gala? Does it leave its colour at home?' and the vendor answers: 'No, the colour is coming in the next trip' (Field note 76, February 2007). The use of this kind of jargon was developed by the old generation greengrocers as part of the way of buying fresh fruit and vegetables at the BACWM. However, new greengrocers such as the Bolivians have added new 'jargon' since some wholesalers have started to say prices in Quechua (pre-Colombian language).

Mr. V knows from experience he has to hide his lack of experience about anything linked to the fresh produce transacted. He should not ask how many kilos there are in a box. He has to infer the quantity and suggest it to the vendor. In each transaction vendors and buyers play a complex game, where fresh fruit and vegetables are the means in this competition for knowledge, prices, honour and reputation. Mr. V, as a young and new greengrocer, explains how he is learning:

> 'I go to the market [BACWM] and they [vendors] tell me if the fruit is prime or commercial and I look at the fruit, its size, etc. Owners [wholesalers] also tell me about quality, seasonality, and so on. Then, you fight for convenient prices. If I buy more than 5 boxes of prunes, for instance, I get a better price. I usually go very early in the morning [4.30 or 5 am] to find the merchandise that I need for my customers [consumers and restaurants]. If I go at noon I won't find big prunes, for instance. And I need them since my clients look more for quality than for price' (Interview 57, 12 March 2008).

Even though Mr. V still learns from vendors' advice, he considers that fresh produce too helps him by giving some information through its appearance, such as colour, smell, etc. He starts to gain knowledge about visual quality attributes of different fresh fruit and vegetables. He constructs his criteria of quality from his social relations (relatives and vendors) and his careful observations, showing an indomitable will to learn. Since his customers pay for quality as well as for imported merchandise such as coconuts, mini pineapples, papayas, or mangos, Mr. V spends his time at 10 main firms situated in three different pavilions of the BACWM. He is always served by the same vendor in each stall. Nothing is anonymous at the market place; even fresh fruit and vegetables have their own brands or geographical origins, and vendors know the growers and the quality of their deliveries. Once, Mr. V was tempted to buy stolen merchandise at the BACWM. Although it seemed to be a good deal, since the merchandise offered had a very convenient price, Mr. V did not buy any. His resistance seems not to obey the honesty rules, but the will to preserve his respectable image.

Mr. V does not give tips to workers that carry the boxes (*changarines*). According to him, it does not work. Tips are linked to favours for selecting the best quality for greengrocers. Since '*peones*' (odd jobbers employed at stalls) are in charge of this activity, it seems that it is better to have a good relationship with them. However, Mr. V follows his criterion, which is probably different from that of Argentinean or Italian greengrocers. As a rule, Argentinean greengrocers do not like Korean and Bolivian greengrocers very much. They believe that Bolivians do not know about fresh produce. Some of them even think that Bolivians are related to drug dealers. These xenophobic expressions are probably linked more to competitive feelings rather than to real statements. Since Bolivians and Peruvians have won a space within fresh fruit and vegetable distribution, their competitors fear losing their position as greengrocers who know how to buy and sell.

Tracking greengrocers at the BACWM shows that the process of constantly qualifying and requalifying fresh fruit and vegetables involves a complex exchange of information, communication and knowledge, which goes beyond official standardisation. Newcomers need to construct strong relationships with vendors in order to learn about quality. Both vendors and buyers know there are multiple types of customers and qualities circulating at the BACWM. This shows how actors determine the quality of a product together.

Each greengrocer has his/her own buying strategy. Some select products by tasting and others by looking. The commodity itself provides information depending on its variety and external aspects, such as colour, shape, size, consistency and texture. Taste is important and needs to be recognised in relation with what the customers usually demand in specific products such as tomatoes, melons, citrus and stone fruits. Every greengrocer looks for fresh fruit and vegetables according to their customers' purchasing power.

The taste and other quality attributes of fresh fruit and vegetables change through the year (seasonality), and they have different enchantments according to their geographical origins. So, the knowledge of fresh products is an important element in making a proper choice. Buyers are constantly evaluating and judging fresh fruit and vegetables with vendors and colleagues who are accompanying and supporting them during the process of market selection. The qualification of the products is based on social relationships established between vendors and buyers who exchange knowledge and information in every purchase. This means that the quality trial is highly personalised rather than anonymous at the BACWM. Buyers visit the same stalls frequently, because of their location and characteristics, ways of doing business, the seller's reputation for fair dealing, courtesy, efficiency and all the personal links between customers and buyers (Callon 1998a, Chamberlin 1948 [1933]).

All of the greengrocers analysed in this chapter show their love of selling and buying fresh fruit and vegetables. After losing an enterprise, for instance, Mr. J continues working at the sector with the same passion that he used to have in the beginning. These greengrocers get very excited when talking about their jobs, showing how they manage their business. Except Case-study 1, the

greengrocers analysed offer fresh-cut vegetables, prepared by themselves or bought at wholesale markets. It demonstrates their capacity to face challenges and improve services in order to increase their economic benefits.

Greengrocers' passion, tacit understanding, skills and knowledge of commercialisation can be visualised by some creative practices. Because boxes do not always carry homogeneous quality and sizes of fresh produce, most of them reclassify merchandise, assigning different prices according to quality. If customers ask which fruits are better to buy, they recommend which ones are better, and also offer clients the possibility to return products if they are not satisfied. Greengrocers teach their employees how to handle fresh produce and take care of them. For instance, Mr. V covers his boxes with a film to avoid dehydration; Mr. J combines different colours of fruit and vegetables in order to attract customers; Mr. G lures people by hanging big, colourful posters with the products on sale; and Mr. Q uses word-of-mouth promotion. Of the different strategies used by these greengrocers in their shops, they feel that the most difficult and interesting task is buying products at wholesale markets, where they have to negotiate price and quality face to face with sellers/wholesalers.

## Quality Construction and the Contradictory Ensemble between Wholesalers and Supermarkets

Despite the established legal framework for quality of fresh fruit and vegetables (SAG 1983a, SAG 1983b, SAG 1983c), the national government does not have a sufficient budget to control the quality of fresh fruit and vegetables efficiently. Thus, private retailers assume a lack of regulations and impose their own 'quality assurance system' (Busch 2007, Morris and Young 2000, Sterns et al. 2001). For instance, supermarkets have developed their own quality standards, both as individual firms and as members of international associations (http://www.globalgap.org). In Argentina, supermarkets have planned to demand from their suppliers good agriculture practice as a requisite in 2010. Thus supermarket managers exclude growers who cannot achieve their quality demands and they avoid buying at the BACWM because of bad quality (Interviews 14, 31-b, 70).

As mentioned in Chapters 2 and 6, the increasing demands of supermarkets with regard to volume and quality during the 1990s implied that innovative wholesalers started to reorganise their enterprises towards the 'new' demand. In order to be able to carry out quick deliveries, the supermarket's suppliers incorporated or increased their primary production, and became specialised in a few products. To do so profitably implied optimising economies of scale, both in fixed investments and in monitoring quality. Thus, in order to guarantee high and consistent volumes, these specialised wholesalers invested in post-harvest cool-chain facilities, transport, and human resources. This means that part of the specialised wholesalers'

production is harvested and sent directly to supermarkets (Gibbon 2003, Viteri 2003).[52]

This section focuses on a particular specialised wholesaler who viewed the growth in supermarket demand of quality and volume as an opportunity to expand his market share by developing his own initiative to meet the supermarket logic of quality standards. Of course not all wholesalers have been equally enthusiastic about changing their working logic. This was not because wholesalers such as José Bové in France are against globalisation trends (Busch and Bain 2004), but rather because they have not achieved either sufficient volume and quality to supply supermarkets or the financial capacity to bear supermarkets' delays of payment.

Despite the diverse and conflicting interests between global and domestic food, negotiations exist at the interface between supermarket procurement officers and wholesalers. These negotiations provide the basis upon which bridges can be built between some wholesalers. Apparently, these suppliers – with their different interests – are able to evaluate information to face the 'new' global challenge. This enables wholesalers – within specific networks – to achieve a certain specialisation to operate in conjunction with the supermarkets' objectives. In this way, contrasting experiences of and ways of organising food distribution – with diverse economic interests – are brought together in the creative construction of new partnerships and organisational options.

In order to understand the interactions between specialised wholesalers and supermarket procurement officers and how these actors negotiate and test the notion of quality according to the exchange situation (Callon, Méadel, and Rabeharisoa 2002), Mr. S's case will be presented here (see also Chapter 4).

Mr. S is a 45-year-old Italian who owns a holding constituted of five different firms: one supplying restaurants, hotels, catering, institutional cantinas, etc.; one of vegetable production, in association with 20 vegetable growers, and packaging; one of transport; one of repackaging and fresh-cut-vegetables; and another one, Wholesale Mr. S S.R.L., which is the mother firm started in 1984 at the BACWM (Arce and Viteri 2009).

Mr. S's commercial activities represent the ways in which a wholesaler engages with and assembles the procurement and efficiency logic of supermarkets all the year round, with consistent quality, variety and volume to set up a continuous chain of fresh fruit and vegetables (cf. Dolan and Humphrey 2000). Mr. S's enterprise improved its services according to the requirements of supermarkets for quality and reliable distribution practices, such as classification, packaging, and transport. Mr. S's commercial activities constructed a knowledge bridge between the wholesale sector and official discourses representing supermarkets as the only significant innovation in food

[52] Since these specialised wholesalers do not sell 100% of the total volume of their sales through the BACWM, many supermarket procurement officers do not consider them as wholesalers.

retailing. Mr. S's commercial activities offer services as binding elements in the local knowledge of what is possible in Argentina and in the global logic of supermarkets in order to reduce transaction costs in the economy of qualities.

Mr. S recalls:

> 'During the 1990s, we used to grow according to supermarket norms of market control and expansion. Supermarkets tried to diminish their transaction costs by avoiding middlemen. It was at this point that we started to supply them with our own production [particularly tomatoes and green leaf vegetables]. We positioned ourselves as full-service wholesalers, offering services to add value. In order to supply fresh product in good conditions of quality, we invested in facilities and logistics. We started to classify products by size and quality and to save time from the harvest to the retailer shops; these were significant contributions to improve our service.'
>
> 'When we started supplying supermarkets, we started to supply consumers that were tired of being deceived by retailers and of the dirtiness of street markets. That is why consumers immediately fell in love with the possibility to choose products themselves at supermarkets. Nevertheless, these new consumer practices presented difficulties that had to be dealt with. People's selection practices created waste problems. In fact, large supermarkets were not interested in employing and training personnel to clean shelves and to advise customers.'
>
> 'In spite of these disadvantages, supermarkets are our main customers because their high-volume demands are very attractive. Since I wanted our products to attract customers, I started to supervise closely how these products were handled. Thus, we trained our own personnel who used to go to different supermarkets to control 'other' employees not to destroy the traceability of the products and to stop them from mixing different brands and qualities they offered to consumers' (Interview 29, 26 December 2006).

A major implication of this 'ethnographic text' is how the wholesaler expresses his experience of interactions with supermarkets. Again, quality is a synonym of services here, and services imply the development of different co-operative networks of relations between actors. These empirical examples challenge us to rethink the social dimension of quality. It is necessary to reposition quality by giving attention to social organisation, communication and knowledge.

Mr. S's ties of commercial functions constitute a multiplicity of elements. Since growers' everyday experiences and interests are frequently linked to production rather than commercial aspects, Mr. S personally organised the supply of quality products from gardens to the marketplace. Besides, Mr. S provides growers with professional advice in order to improve the technical aspects of producing fresh produce. This knowledge feeds back into the

existing interpersonal networks, thus generating a complex and innovative pattern of organisation and technologies, but also new social interactions between growers and wholesalers.

Relations between Mr. S and supermarket procurement officers go beyond existing configurations of production, retailing and consumption orientations. These relations of interpersonal organisation have oriented him to integrate primary production into the construction of a chain upon which specific items of information and a new social view of the sector are internalised and reworked within the specific and problematic context of supermarkets and the business of fresh produce in Argentina. Mr. S bought a co-operative of growers in 2000/2001 and started to invest in sustainable agricultural practices. By observing the evolution of fresh fruit and vegetable demand in the high-income sectors, Mr. S thought supermarkets should commercially move to disseminating technological knowledge to promote sustainable agricultural practices (see Chapter 4). Thus, Mr. S recalls:

> 'Before having problems of 'understanding' with supermarkets, we believed supermarkets had the same goals as we had. We started doing the tasks required to be a full-service shipper and adopted low environmental impact practices. Our vegetable chain was under strict quality control and we wanted to show that we were committed to the environment and to having more consumers through our own fresh product brand (BIOS). But, as supermarkets in Argentina are not interested in offering eco-friendly goods and services, it is impossible to link the use of environmental and organic production practices to a specific consumer category. Not even a single supermarket accepted a set of common interests in developing and using agro-ecological technologies.'
>
> 'Even when entrepreneurs like me have realised the value of organic practices, I cannot deploy my market creativity because of a lack of investment and my disagreements with supermarket strategies. It seems that they are more interested in destroying local brands than in seeing the potential to educate consumers and make them loyal to a particular quality and environmental responsible supplier in fresh fruit and vegetables.'
>
> 'I never left the BACWM because price formation takes place there. But, it was very difficult to make supermarkets understand how to 'play' with prices. [53] They didn't know about seasonality; they looked only at the prices of competitors. We had to explain to them, for example, that we cannot harvest lettuce after a rainy day. I think that these misunderstandings broke off our relationship. Although we shared goals, we realised that we worked in a completely different way. Although we supplied them with fresh

[53] Mr. S knows the price setting at the BACWM is now linked to the oligopsony position of supermarkets

> vegetables such as tomatoes, they didn't want to rely on our services, because they feared to become dependent on our enterprise' (Field note 62b, 5 May 2007).

Although Mr. S insists in explaining his relationship with supermarket procurement officers to be not an enriching experience, his interactions with these 'global' actors allow him and other wholesalers to innovate and increase their businesses (see Chapters 4 and 6). Mr. S and a few other specialised wholesalers started to produce under the good agricultural practices (GAP) code since supermarkets have the premise to be supplied 100% by growers under the GAP code by 2010. However, Mr. S wanted to go a step further by entering into low environmental impact practices and developing his own brand. By so doing, he wanted to conquer consumer loyalty through his new brand. However, Mr. S failed to mobilise the support of supermarkets for his strategy. So, he decided to start a new business without completely breaking up his relation with supermarkets. This new business is linked to supplying premium quality fresh-cut vegetables to restaurants and international hotels.

In short, despite the supermarkets' efforts to control suppliers and surpass the BACWM, they are not able to exercise total control over fresh fruit and vegetable distribution due to wholesalers' tacit knowledge, consumer habits and critical socio-economic context of Argentina, but also because of the entrepreneurs' capacity and creativity to work with quality. Different parties are involved in these quality circuits and they have learned from each other. However, it seems that supermarket procurement officers (eager to control their procurements) provide to other parties limited room for negotiations. This is potentially a constant source of conflicts and tensions between supermarkets and suppliers.

Mr. S's experience shows different interpretations of quality by those actors involved in this transaction process. On the one hand, Mr. S – like other specialised wholesalers – looked to increase the presence of his fresh produce on supermarket shelves, trying to persuade customers by his own brand. On the other hand, supermarkets developed their own standard of 'non-price' competition, looking for suppliers that fit in with their global logic of sourcing. In spite of Mr. S's interests, supermarkets continued to apply their own rules to save time and money. So, why did this win-win relationship fail? Initially, Mr. S developed a good quality of service to suit supermarket demand. Once this happens, other factors/elements arrive onto the transaction scene. Despite the supermarkets 'non-price' competition, prices continue to play an important role in these exchanges. Of course, price negotiation comes after dealing with high demanding quality standards.

According to Reardon et al. (2001), the quality grades and standards of supermarkets have shifted from a technical instrument to reduce transaction costs to a strategic instrument of competition, market penetration, co-ordination, and quality and safety assurance. The co-ordination of quality, as Mr. S's case showed, seems to be only linked to the supermarkets' own criteria and interests. As Busch and Bain (2004) point out, the private sector

standards lack democratic procedures for establishing them in each transaction. And this is quite an important obstacle when fresh fruit and vegetables are involved, since these products are still linked to biological and climate conditions (Goodman et al. 1987). However, beyond international quality standards, supermarket procurement officers attempt to combine these standards with real supply, taking into account the volume and quality available. This can be analysed by taking into account their buying practices.

As a rule, commercial managers of large supermarkets have more difficulty in acquiring good quality because of the excessive amount of volume they have to control. However, the possibility to buy the best quality depends on the supermarket procurement officer's skills and his access to information. That is why some procurement officers usually visit the BACWM. One of them, who belonged to a medium-size supermarket, explains how they organise their supplies taking quality into account:

> 'The evolution of business and competition pushed us to improve quality. Thus, we started to buy directly from growers. First we bought potatoes, citrous fruits and apples from them since they are located in a few production areas and we always need a considerable amount of them. Then, we started buying other fresh produce. But it is impossible to have contacts with growers in each production area. For instance, melons from the North-West are of better quality than the ones from Cuyo, where we have personal contacts. So, I started to buy here (BACWM) because of the higher quality and lack of contacts with growers from the North-West.'
>
> 'Things have changed, not only because of competition, but because the supply of fresh produce, particularly of vegetables, has fallen. Up to the 1990s, we were able to choose from different quality levels. I learnt a lot in those days. My colleague explained to me how bananas reach ripeness or how to look at other fresh produce in order to take information from them. Nowadays, we train our procurement officers and personnel in charge of restocking fresh fruit and vegetable shelves. We have a list of our quality and size requirements with pictures of each product. This list, however, is only a reference because each fruit and vegetable is a world in itself. We buy a truck-load of oranges, for instance, and we know only when we open the pallet how these oranges evolved from the farm to our platform. In this sense, Bolivian retailers have the advantage that they select their merchandise beforehand because they manage less volume' (Interview 44, 30 April 2007).

The experience of this manager goes beyond the abstract manuals of quality. Although quality manuals are useful to train new employees and negotiate with suppliers, personal experience and social relationships are crucial elements for a space of negotiating inflexible standards (Barry 2002). These rules, however, have helped buyers and sellers to exchange experiences and knowledge. For instance, an ex-supermarket procurement officer (Interview

17) remembers that they used to buy apples from Patagonia before 1991. The loading and unloading of trucks was done by hand and the merchandise was not on pallets, so the apple boxes received several impacts before they were transported to the supermarket shelves. In order to improve quality conditions, supermarket procurement officers demanded suppliers to commercialise fresh produce using devices such as refrigerated trucks, pallets and fork-lift trucks, in order to avoid the impacts received before. Since this innovation implied expensive investment, few vegetable growers implemented them, whereas trade-fruit growers had already put it into practice before.

The relationship between sellers and buyers around the quality of fresh fruit and vegetables involves 'multiple worlds' (cf. Murdoch et al. 2000). It is a relation of commercial transaction, where price and quality are negotiated in both the long and short terms. As discussed previously, although standardisation is useful to avoid misunderstanding, products such as fresh fruit and vegetables can evolve in different ways from the market garden to supermarkets since they are still alive. Thus, elements of trust are needed in order to negotiate these unexpected facts. It can be illustrated by social practices. One wholesaler explains how he manages his relationships with different managers of supermarkets:

> 'We have been selling fresh vegetables to supermarkets since 1993. There are supermarkets that need only 5,000 kilos of tomatoes a day, while others demand more than 50,000 kilos. I sell fresh vegetables to supermarkets because they buy more than 20,000 boxes a week. This kind of client fits me very well. We can even do business on the phone because we trust each other.'
>
> 'I stopped delivering to one of the large supermarket chains because they changed the procurement manager. The new one stopped buying from me without explanation. I have insisted to have an interview with the new management for the last year and a half, but they never answered. One day, I received a phone call from this new manager asking me for the 'tomato of the government' [referring to the official price control, see Chapter 5]. Since I told her that I had these tomatoes only for customers who also bought other products from me throughout the year, she never phoned me again' (Interview 43, 22 March 2007).

This wholesaler expresses that elements of loyalty are as important as the possibility to lose a profitable business. But he does not mean that wholesalers always act with passion. This wholesaler's behaviour shows that this commercial relation is built on an infinite number of elements. And these elements go from passion to price negotiation, from quality attributes of fresh fruit and vegetables to images and meanings like brands. Despite Mr. S's failure, some brands or trademarks are already imposed on the shelves of supermarkets, particularly for fruits.

Although fresh fruit and vegetables represent only 5% of the total value of supermarket sales (INDEC 2009), they are important for the overall image

(freshness, cleanliness) of the store. Besides, their rapid turn-over offers a higher profit margin than other categories (Ghezán et al. 2002a). Thus, supermarket procurement officers frequently push suppliers towards a particular conception of quality, linked to services that avoid excessive handling and quality and size heterogeneity. During the 1990s, supermarkets were constantly experimenting with new fresh and packaged products to persuade consumers into their stores as well as to encourage repeat sales. The ex-supermarket procurement officers interviewed recognise that nowadays supermarkets do not have the same interest in fresh fruit and vegetables than they had in the 1990s:

> 'The lack of interest in fresh produce is not only linked to the decrease in profits or in trained personnel. After 2001, trade-fruit companies have not been interested in selling their products to us because there was an increase in exports. Thus, working in supermarkets today is like hell. They hire young people who know nothing about quality or fresh fruit and vegetables and teach them only how to negotiate prices' (Interview 71, 21 February 2008).
>
> 'If you diminish personnel, you diminish quality. If you don't place fresh produce on the shelves every day, nobody will buy fruits or vegetables the following day. Some of these large retailers should have more than 15 employees in this sector, but they hire only 12. The culture of 'specialists' has been lost. It is very difficult to find supermarket employees who know, for instance, that they must open banana boxes in order for them to become coloured. In the 1990s, we used to train personnel. We advised them on how to work with fresh fruit and vegetables. Fruits are easier to handle than vegetables because of the possibility of using cold chambers. Besides, consumers touch and select merchandise, generating waste. Thus, we had to buy high quality to offer an acceptable quality level' (Interview 17, 27 April 2007).

This procurement officer's opinion stresses the important role that complex elements play in the negotiation of quality between suppliers and buyers. Similar situations are described in countries such as France, Italy and Spain (Cadilhon et al. 2003, de Raymond 2007, Gibbon 2003), where also legal frameworks protect wholesaler activities from aggressive competition by supermarkets.

## Conclusions

Quality is part of a complex world linking food attributes with social actors. In other words, fresh fruit and vegetables' visual features, together with their seasonality and geographical origins, are always intertwined with social actors' practices, knowledge, and lifestyles associated with economic contexts. This chapter has shown how social encounters assemble global forms

of retailing through the more local social construction of business and entrepreneurship.

The formalisation of quality into a national system is not easy to achieve and is potentially conflictive in nature. In fact, as demonstrated by the avocado controversy, quality is not only a set of normative procedures for ordering the fruit market. It seems that policy-makers and experts become embedded in and serve the interests of a global export sector (innovative producers). The attempt to legitimise this 'new quality avocado' opened up the political and social dimension of quality, where the state does not always defend local difference and variety. Despite the newly imposed avocado quality norm, some growers and retailers are able to continue commercialising other varieties that do not always achieve the official standard of quality. This is clearly illustrated at the BACWM, where different qualities and varieties of avocados are sold. The avocado event points to the significance of the process of fresh fruit and vegetable's qualification, where diverse types of actors deal with new circumstances, such as the introduction of new quality initiatives. Such an analysis contributes to exploring the specific social effect of global quality standards and the differential responses of particular face-to-face relationships, which also participate in the material specificity of a contemporary construction of quality.

Other ways of organising business around quality was analysed through 4 case-studies of greengrocers. These cases showed how these retailers look for quality according to their customers' preferences and budgets. Greengrocers' purchasing practices disclose their capacity of dealing with bewildering quality criteria, creating an economy of variability (de Raymond 2007). Through their interaction with wholesalers, these social actors negotiate quality guided by economic and non-economic (commoditised or non-commoditised) elements. Parts of these elements are in the wider context where these social transactions take place.

The relationships between wholesalers and supermarket procurement officers show another face of quality. The accommodation process of implementing global quality criteria should not imply that knowledge discontinuities do not exist between wholesalers and the logistic quality requirements of supermarkets (high and consistent volumes). Indeed, as shown in this chapter, these discontinuities often reinforce the existence of opposing world-views on fresh product distribution and business practices.

Mr. S's experience shows the capacity of wholesalers to build a bridge between their tacit knowledge and supermarkets' global requirements. Mr. S cross-cuts official discourses representing supermarkets as the only significant innovation in food retailing. He was able to train people in the handling of fresh vegetables, improve post-harvest practices, and technological cool-chain facilities. He was able to do so due to his capacity to create and recreate new and old social networks. However, his efforts to establish win-win relationships with supermarkets were not successful. This shows that the encounter at the interface between wholesalers and supermarkets was not flexible enough to bring about the possibility to construct creative relations.

It seems that supermarket procurement officers focus only on global quality standards. However, supermarkets are not disembodied forms of global organisation. In other words, supermarkets are not only efficient precision points of rational and efficient governance practices that reproduce unproblematically the value-chain organisation model. In fact, they are carriers of global encounters generating emergent social interactions (see Chapter 6).

At the BACWM, social actors qualify and requalify fresh fruit and vegetables according to differences in individual knowledge, experience and business acquaintance. These interactions generate heterogeneous assemblages where 'modern' and 'precise' food distribution procedures (large producers and supermarkets) coexist with a variety of 'other' distribution circuits (greengrocers, wholesale distributor, food service). The case-studies presented in this chapter illustrate how 'real' social practices are infinitely more complex than normative differentiations of quality, either as vertical co-ordination or as a bunch of distributed attributes.

These issues require a complex and contested notion of quality to explain why different groups react differently to an apparently 'similar concept of quality'. Consequently, the study of quality should give attention to localise social interactions and knowledge interface processes. This should not blind the researcher to the effects of important global processes and the impact of large retailers (supermarkets). Encounters between producers and quality norms, between wholesalers and greengrocers or supermarket procurement officers explain the social and political dimensions of quality.

Finally, this chapter has shown the active role played by the BACWM as a local meeting place that is not an anomaly of other times within the global space. This indicates the crucial link that exists between the practical and the epistemological and policy dimension of food quality.

# 8 Conclusions and Discussion

## The Relevance of Enacting the Social Practices in Food Studies

The research presented in this thesis has analysed how the social actors involved in fresh produce distribution face challenges in interaction and by exchanging/transacting both material and non-material goods. To comprehend the actors' capacity to face challenges in order to maintain themselves in the fresh produce industry, the BACWM was selected as the main 'stage' (cf. Goffman 1975). This 'stage' is where the set, the actors, the actions and the audience are constantly interacting. So, the stage is a metaphorically useful window to examine the complexity of fresh fruit and vegetable distribution (cf. Busch 2007).

The BACWM is a place made not only by structures (facilities or buildings) but also 'by diverse physical, biological, social and cultural processes constructed through relations between entities of various kinds' (Harvey 1996, quoted in Murdoch 2006). This complex assemblage of people, products and market devices (trading and quality protocols, phones, warehouses, etc.) involves different chains and networks of fresh produce. The focus has been restricted to interactions that have been studied ethnographically.

The multiple social interactions developed at this marketplace are part of the heterogeneity of fresh produce. Fresh fruit and vegetables can be differentiated according to diverse botanical varieties, geographical origins, degrees of quality, and the various ways of producing, packaging, transporting and distributing. Thus, the social actors involved at the BACWM deal with that diversity in order to achieve economic (increased profit, credits, investments, reduced costs, etc.) and non-economic (sociability, approval, status and power) goals. This means that their actions are economic and social at the same time. Hence, in this research, the so-called economic practices are analysed as part of the social lives, passions and networks developed through the exchange of different varieties of fresh fruit and vegetables. By adding the social dimension of everyday practices, the present study explained economic actions beyond logical and rational ways of doing business.

The research focused on the everyday life of the BACWM, by giving particular attention to the social interactions within the context of fresh produce distribution. Social practices allowed understanding this marketplace beyond existing rigid classifications such as 'modern'/'traditional' or 'public'/'private' spheres. Although most of the scholars interested in wholesale markets (Cadilhon et al. 2003, Cook 2004b, Green et al. 2006) agree with the importance of these places in providing fresh produce to urban residents, they classify wholesale markets as either 'modern' (third generation) or 'traditional' markets. According to this criterion, the BACWM is a 'traditional' market that does not face challenges such as traceability, quality certification, cold chain, or intermodal transport. This classification dichotomises the social actors involved in fresh fruit and vegetable distribution as 'traditional' and 'modern'. In order to avoid binary positions, this work has privileged the use of more dynamic methods that use empirical data to construct theory. By so doing, the thesis has shown that the same actors can perform as both 'traditional' and 'modern' at the same time, according to the different situations (Chapter 4, 6 and 7).

Methodologically, the thesis is in favour of approaches that focus on how everyday social practices generate multiple ways of food production, circulation and consumption in order to show the heterogeneities and diversities of food spaces (Arce and Marsden 1993, Marsden and Arce 1995a). As explained in Chapter 1, this research has used elements of the actor-network approach (Latour 2005, Latour and Woolgar 1979) and, particularly, an actor-oriented perspective (Arce and Long 2000a, Long 2001a, Long and Long 1992) to understand the heterogeneities of fresh produce distribution at the BACWM. These perspectives allow us to avoid the rigidity and linear characterisations of production–consumption supply management chains or value chains used in political economy (Friedland 2008, Gereffi et al. 2005, McMichael 1994).

The actor-oriented approach allows for disclosing social differentiation in the value construction of food. In this case, by observing multiple social practices developed at the BACWM it is possible to explain how the market 'makers' (Abolafia 1998) achieve to maintain this institution as an important hub within

fresh produce distribution in the metropolitan area of Buenos Aires. Although fresh fruit and vegetables, buildings and other market devices are primordial parts of the heterogeneous social networks created at this marketplace, this research does not give agency[54] to them. The symmetry between *actants* supported by scholars of actor-network theory (Latour 2005) and convention theory (Thévenot 2001) is not applied in this thesis. Social actors are seen here as having the power to provide different status onto fresh produce properties and other market devices (cf. Arce and Long 2000b, Golinski 1998, Murdoch 1998). As defined in Chapter 1, it is the author's decision to give agency to non-human subjects rather than considering that market devices have their own agency.

This research is not in favour of classifying social actors' behaviour in different models. Although convention theory scholars (Boltanski and Thévenot 1999) apply the principle that 'the same human being has to engage in different modes of conduct which vary from one situation to another' (Thévenot 2001: 406), they keep insisting on classifying these creative and heterogeneous activities in different worlds of justifications rather than analysing how things are done by actors in practice. Hence, drawing on the actor-oriented perspective (Arce 2009b, Arce and Marsden 1993), the present research has adopted a more dynamic approach attempting to reflect the heterogeneity of the fresh fruit and vegetable distribution based on social practices, without classifying them. By so doing, data collected during fieldwork is not forced to fit into any particular framework. On the contrary, the theoretical argument is based on empirical evidence (Arce and Long 2000a, Evens and Handelman 2006) and reinforced by the idea that complexity cannot be analysed by classifying only a limited number of conventions or agreements between actors (Morgan et al. 2006a).

It is worth noting that the research methods used in this thesis create new realities that are a product of a reflexive process involving collected data, theoretical readings and academic discussions (Woolgar 1988). New realities imply that the methods used to understand the BACWM are productive by way of this process of reflexivity. The methods (help to) make social realities and social worlds.[55] Consequently, this process of reflexivity can continue through the readers of this thesis. In other words, the present work attempts to be part of social actions rather than an individualist analysis of fresh produce distribution in the metropolitan area of Buenos Aires.

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[54] Agency refers to the knowledgeability, capability and social embeddedness associated with acts of doing (and reflecting) that impact upon one's own and others' actions and interpretations (Giddens 1979) in a given reality. People attribute agency to various objects and ideas. Agency is composed of a complex mix of social, cultural and material elements (Long 2001a).

[55] Law and Urry (2004) assure that social research methods are *performative*. Thus, they suggest that economics are always shaping the economy. Economists make up the economic reality by using their market theories (Law and Urry 2004, MacKenzie and Muniesa 2007).

## The Market as a Space of Social Interactions

As explained, the complex realities developed around fresh produce demands an approach that takes into consideration the social actors (Arce and Long 2000a, Long 2001a) and their interactions (Blau 1964, Homans 1958). Social relations perform or express different and non-conformable spaces that cannot be broken up into different theoretical kingdoms and methodological principalities of varying sizes. This was demonstrated through empirical studies of everyday practices at the BACWM. So, the multiple effects produced by political interventions or global/local interactions were analysed through a non-linear perspective (De Landa 1997). This means that an assemblage of relations would not occupy a homogeneous and conformable space; on the contrary, they occupy non-Euclidean/topological spaces (Law 1997, Law and Urry 2004). This position was explained in Chapter 1.

Social actors at the BACWM perform a quite different kind of spatiality, which is not flat and cannot be described through maps or plans (cf. Murdoch 2006: 12). This thesis avoided analysing/seeing fresh produce distribution through a straight line of evolution, as if the so-called 'modern' distribution were the inevitable outcome. For instance, social practices at the BACWM show that 'modern' practices with all their forms are only one alternative among several. These practices are blended with other practices to demonstrate that social actors implement multiple and heterogeneous ways of distributing fresh produce in the metropolitan area of Buenos Aires over the last 20 years.

The complex space of the BACWM was and still is produced in non-arbitrary ways, in dense and extended sets of relations that cannot be understood by linear explanations such as the 'laws' of supply and demand (cf. Busch 2007, Law and Urry 2004), which try to show the world in a flat and plain dimension. This is demonstrated in different chapters of this thesis (Chapters 3, 4, 6 and 7). For instance, the formation of price at the BACWM involves more than cause-and-effect relationships. Buyers and sellers negotiate prices beyond supply and demand or degrees of quality. They negotiate prices by taking into account other elements, such market hours, political interventions, friendship, etc. These elements can be observed while buyers and sellers perform at the BACWM.

Through a group of selected ethnographies, this thesis has explained/explored how users of the BACWM accommodate, resist, interpret and shape their lives, businesses and professions in relation to political interventions and other social, technological and natural changes. By paying attention to the material and non-material goods exchanged between BACWM's users, the present work has understood this marketplace beyond the economic world of interests. Thus, social actors interact not only to face economic uncertainties such as the shortage of products at a particular moment, the imperfect information or different economic changes, but also to construct long-term relationships related to their kinship or professional networks.

The following sections of this chapter present the main conclusions drawn from the empirical elements observed at the BACWM during 2006–2008. The material is organised according to the main research questions stated in the Introduction. These questions are: How was the BACWM created? What does this marketplace look like? How is it organised? How do its users' everyday practices construct and reconstruct the BACWM through their interactions?

## The Construction of the Buenos Aires Central Wholesale Market

The BACWM, like all institutions, was and still is socially constructed (cf. Berger and Luckman 1966, quoted by Granovetter 1992). This was shown throughout the thesis, particularly in Chapter 2. The creation of the BACWM was a result of a national intervention. This national project looked to improve the distribution of fresh fruit and vegetables in the metropolitan area of Buenos Aires by relocating old wholesale markets from down-town to suburban areas. This political decision, intending to achieve an efficient set of procedures for fresh fruit and vegetable distribution, did not take into account the social actors involved in these activities (Frigerio 1973). While policy-makers attempted to create a Euclidean, absolute or topographical space (Law 1997, Lefebvre 1991, Murdoch 1998) for wholesalers, porters and civil servants, the latter transformed this abstract space into a 'lived' space.

The encounter between policy-makers and social actors in various old wholesale markets in several neighbourhoods of Buenos Aires explains why the 'new' marketplace was not created in a social 'vacuum' (Garcia-Parpet 2007). The efforts of policy-makers to 'organise' the distribution of fresh fruit and vegetables was faced by the counterwork of rational and passionate social actors already involved in diverse formal and informal networks (cf. Gudeman 2008).

Since the inauguration of the BACWM (1984), complex and multifaceted relations of change and interaction have been developed. These partially connected heterogeneous relations (cf. Law 1997) were analysed by observing social actors' practices, such as political interventions, or newcomers, such as buyers (supermarkets, new immigrants). Chapter 2 has explained the importance of studying the BACWM through empirical evidence.

In short, although policy-makers made an effort to build a marketplace of order and discipline, their interactions with other BACWM users led to a more complex spatiality. Political interventions generated consensus or collaboration as well as resistance among the users of the BACWM. This was illustrated at the start of the BACWM when many wholesalers moved from old wholesale marketplaces to the 'new' one, whereas others persisted or reopened new marketplaces despite the regulation norms that banned wholesaling activities within the 60 kilometre perimeter of competitive protection around the BACWM. These counter-tendencies, which are part of the everyday life of the BACWM, create/disseminate multiple and diverse ways of fresh fruit and vegetable distribution.

## The Functions and the Body of the Wholesale Market

The BACWM is the main centre of fresh fruit and vegetable distribution in Argentina. It supplies more than 11 million consumers and receives about 13,000 trucks a week from different production areas both within and outside the country (http://www.mercadocentral.com.ar). The body of the BACWM covers an area of 540 hectares, 210 of which are used for fresh fish, fruit and vegetable commercialisation and administration activities. The rest is reserved for future investments, such as storage facilities. The administration, laboratory, warehouses and commercial pavilions are different scenes where social actors create their own domains.

Wholesalers, civil servants, policy-makers, pedlars, porters (*changarines*), odd jobbers (*peones*), vendors, growers and buyers are identified with particular domains linked to their labours and spaces of work. These different social domains are always interacting by way of numerous formal and informal rules. The domains of porters, civil servants or vendors comprise their ambiguities and conflicts within the group and with other groups. They are always struggling over resources in multiple ways. This is illustrated through different interactions between BACWM's users. They fight for different work positions, loyalty, prestige and recognition from their different bosses or authorities (see Chapters 3 and 4). They also maintain relationships with other social actors who commercialise fresh fruit and vegetables beyond the walls of this marketplace. Some porters and wholesalers, for instance, work in other wholesale markets (Chapters 2 and 3); civil servants offer their knowledge to other fresh produce companies (Chapters 3 and 4); and, particularly, porters and odd jobbers attract outsiders such as politicians who close their electoral campaign at the BACWM (Chapter 3). These social interactions show that the BACWM is more than a group of buildings and facilities or a commercial space where fresh fruit and vegetable are sold, the BACWM is a place of livelihood for most of its users.

Everyone at this marketplace interacts directly or indirectly with different domains related to fresh fruit and vegetables. However, wholesalers show the highest capacity to build fresh produce networks between market insiders and outsiders. Besides their employees, colleagues, and civil servants, wholesalers are always in contact with fresh produce growers, buyers, exporters and importers. In addition, wholesalers are in charge of their own market gardens or orchards. As shown in Chapter 4, all these activities increase wholesalers' abilities of doing business with a heterogeneous group of people. The diverse orgins of wholesalers (in terms of kinship and nationality) and personalities explain in part how they are able to survive and even do good business in time of challenges. The multiple practices and creative strategies of wholesalers are related to their different ways of learning and the capacities of constructing networks and investing in facilities, primary production, logistics and brands. However, this does not mean that every wholesaler achieves to maintain his/her position (see Chapters 3 and 4).

Wholesalers strive to sell not only fresh fruit and vegetables but also their 'brand-name', offering good service and quality to their suppliers and buyers. This variability of strategies provides opportunities to small as well as large growers and buyers to fulfil their economic expectations of supplying or buying fresh produce to or from wholesalers who offer the products that they need. This economy of variability differs completely from the economy of standardisation, which does not give a place to heterogeneities (cf. de Raymond 2007, Star 1991). However, wholesalers – particularly the specialised ones – show their capacity to deal with the quality and logistic standards imposed by international trade organisations or supermarkets and with personal interactions where quality is negotiated according to circumstances. This allows wholesalers to be flexible enough to adapt their businesses to their suppliers and buyers. This economy of variability is evidenced by the capacity of the users of the BACWM to perform beyond dualisms such as 'modern' and 'traditional'.

By analysing the BACWM from the perspectives of its users, it was possible to show how important this place is for chairmen, civil servants, wholesalers, odd-jobbers, porters, pedlars, poor people and the like. The BACWM represents their livelihoods, their political and professional careers, their lives constructed through their kinship and friendship networks. Porters and odd-jobbers can defend the BACWM with their bodies if it is necessary (Chapter 3). Wholesalers spend their lives working in the BACWM (Chapter 4) and civil servants fight in different ways in order to build a 'perfect' marketplace according to their own criteria (Chapters 3 and 5). Although each of them has a different interpretation of this marketplace, most of them show passion and love for activities related to fresh fruit and vegetables. Thus, the thesis gave priority to creative rather than rational behaviours, showing the resilience of this marketplace where different feelings are intertwined with commercial business. Hence, the social practices of BACWM's users show the necessity for a wider approach that analyses economic performances by taking into account social actors' interests to do business as well as their love and passion for money and honour (Etzioni 1988, Hirschman 1977, Storr 2007).

## The BACWM as a Place of Hierarchy and Horizontal Networks

The BACWM is a place where discipline and order (hierarchy, abstract spaces) attempt to overcome the heterogeneous associations of people intertwined in multiple interactions (lived spaces). Different conceptions of space have already changed since the beginnings of the BACWM. Chapter 5 has shown how these controversies over space continue to be part of the everyday practices between the administrators and other users of this marketplace. Norms and regulations implemented by the hierarchy give way to different reactions from wholesalers, generating multiple conceptions of how to organise the BACWM. These ideas about organisation go from complete control to horizontal network activities. In order to understand this complexity, the research has explained the organisation of this market as a place trying to

achieve 'social coordination open to uncertainty, critical tensions and creative arrangements' (Thévenot 2001).

By focusing on wholesalers, civil servants and chairmen's discourses and interactions, Chapter 5 attempted to unravel authority and power within the complex organisation of the BACWM. Social discourses give the impression that hierarchy is linked to the visibility of the BACWM's organisation represented by the activities of chairmen and civil servants (the so-called 'public' spheres), while horizontal and informal relationships are related to matters of business people (the so-called 'private' spheres). As shown in Chapter 5, wholesalers classify themselves as 'private', efficient and competent actors and exchange symbols of disapproval for the way in which the administration is organised. In the same way, chairmen complain about the wholesalers' weak institutionalisation, which does not allow them to organise the BACWM in the way they think it should be. So, why social actors strive to express these differences? Probably, this is because it enables the group on each side ('public' versus 'private') to blame the other group for policy failures (Clay and Schaffer 1984). In this vein, it is the interface dimension that provides a sense of connection to the private and public spheres setting up a framework of fresh fruit and vegetable distribution in Argentina. Social interactions show that these different domains of 'public' and 'private' defined by social actors are blurred (Dewey 1954, Granovetter 2004, Weintraub 1997).

In sum, the organisation of this marketplace is more than just rules and norms; it is a blend of hierarchical types of co-ordination and informal networks. As described before, the BACWM is not the planned result of policy-makers' decisions. This marketplace is part of the unintended collective consequences of interactions between planners, wholesalers, civil servants and other users and of other accumulated experiences of various actors operating in the sector. So, the BACWM cannot be co-ordinated exclusively by experts who impose discipline (*governmentality*) since the hierarchy is under constant conflict and negotiation with other users of the BACWM.

The lack of 'total' co-ordination at the BACWM has led me to analyse this space beyond the concept of *governmentality* (Foucault 1991). As explained in Chapter 1, *governmentality* is a concept associated with elite or expert practices (Arce and Long 2010). In this case, it is related to chairmen, policy-makers and auditors. Examples of the failure to implement this *governmentality* vary from the creation of a marketplace for controlling 'blood-sucking' wholesalers (Chapter 2) to the last interventions related to price control (Chapter 5).By analysing different processes of intervention at the BACWM, it was possible to recognise the capacity of other social actors to negotiate or face the new conditions developed after the intervention. Thus, chapter 5 has analysed two political interventions at the BACWM in different historical moments and the contemporary proliferation of old and new wholesale markets (see Chapter 2).

By analysing different processes of intervention at the BACWM, it was possible to recognise the capacity of other social actors to negotiate or face the new conditions developed after the intervention. Thus, Chapter 5 has analysed two political interventions at the BACWM at different moments in history and the contemporary proliferation of old and new wholesale markets (see Chapter 2).

Political interventions show how policy-makers attempt to co-ordinate the BACWM. Although Mr. Patti's (1993–1995) and Mr. Moreno's (2006–present) interventions achieved part of their goals, they were not politically able to co-ordinate the BACWM. Mr. Patti is still renowned as a symbol of order within both the civil servant and wholesaler domains. His success as a chairman (indeed an auditor) can be related to his own interest in surveying rather than improving fresh fruit and vegetable distribution. The second political intervention was related to price control. Although the auditor, Mr. Moreno, attempted to negotiate with wholesalers, he did not reach a consensus. He was not able to change his style of administration from a hierarchical mentality to a more negotiable intervention, and he did not take into account other social actors' perspectives and practices. Part of his failure can be seen through the present practices of wholesalers and buyers. They, in order to continue with their business, have created and recreated new and old circulation channels (black markets), which are outside the official price channels. These recurrent counter-tendencies show the difficulties that policy-makers face in controlling the BACWM by imposing their own rules.

Another aspect of controversies between rules and practices is the contemporary proliferation of new and old wholesale markets within the BACWM's 60 km perimeter of competitive protection. Despite the efforts of the national government to legalise these marketplaces, most of them continue to sell fresh fruit and vegetables in the shadows. They effectively resist institutionalisation. Although wholesalers in the BACWM consider this wholesale market network as unfair competition, the horizontal interaction between them is intense. Some porters and wholesalers work both at the BACWM and at these 'other' wholesale markets. In addition, local politicians support these small wholesale markets, because they represent an important source of revenue and employment.

In sum, the proliferation of these marketplaces and the performances of their users demonstrate that diverse interests and positions interact within the BACWM, making this a space filled by a variety of claims and interests. These heterogeneities give way to a complex organisation in which hierarchical and horizontal networks are blended. However, it seems that counterwork prevails over hierarchical forms of organising the BACWM. Thus, policy-makers are not able to transform the BACWM into a quiet place of discipline and order (cf. Foucault 1991).

The BACWM is the outcome of the social interactions of multiple worlds of production, distribution, and consumption, which involve multidimensional and contested realities (cf. Arce 2009b). The fragmented nature of fresh fruit and vegetable circuits developed at the BACWM show that social actors accommodate their strategies and businesses according to their capacities to

reconstruct social ties. At the BACWM, power and authority are not elements in the hands of only a few actors or institutions. Power and authority are outcome of social interactions (Arce and Long 1994, Giddens 1977, Mann 1986).

## Global/Local Interactions at the Buenos Aires Wholesale Market

In Argentinean fresh fruit and vegetable distribution, local–global interactions have always been present at export and import activities. However, the establishment of multinational supermarket companies in the 1980s has innovated and transformed the relationships between supply and demand in different ways. In order to reduce transaction costs, supermarkets have implemented new technologies and new ways of provision. Until 1995, supermarkets used to buy 90% of fresh fruit and vegetables at the BACWM but later restricted the relationship to a few specialised wholesalers and large growers (Gutman 1997). This form of distribution was illustrated in Chapter 6 by analysing different encounters between specialised wholesalers and supermarket procurement officers, particularly through the biography and experience of one of the wholesalers working at the BACWM.

Chapter 6 has explained how different worlds of knowledge and meaning interact between different actors, who hold their own representations and ideas of value and supply chains in their respective commercial contexts. The relationship between buyer and seller was studied as an interface of knowledge and power (Arce 1989, Long 1989, Long 1992). On the one hand, supermarket procurement officers strive to enrol specialised wholesalers in their 'quality and logistics projects' and, on the other hand, specialised wholesalers ask supermarket procurement officers for win–win relations in order to share risks and investments in logistics, new varieties, or transport.

Encounters of this kind are clear examples of how 'external' or geographically distant actors shape social processes, strategies and actions at the BACWM (cf. Arce 2000). These localised interactions generate an unplanned result, which goes beyond individual knowledge and practices. Specialised wholesalers and supermarket procurement officers end up constructing a new 'competitive space', where quality and logistic norms are negotiated (Marsden et al. 1998). This negotiation implies a process of learning for both buyers and sellers. Wholesalers incorporated the supermarkets' 'manual' of practices (quality and logistic requirements), while supermarket procurement officers took advantage of the knowledge embodied in wholesalers' practices and experiences. Both parts have learnt from and adapted to competitive pressures in complex networks that imply knowledge from different locations (Currah and Wrigley 2004). Wholesalers show the capacity to combine their own local knowledge with hegemonic and global actors such as supermarkets by supplying to both the so-called modern (fast-food, supermarkets) and traditional buyers (home deliveries, street markets, boutiques, institutions, etc.) and by being supplied by their own production, importers, exporters, and small and large growers. These multiple and heterogeneous ways of

distribution show part of the complexity of fresh produce distribution, which cannot be analysed by separating these activities through dualisms such as global/local or traditional/modern. This explains why global processes are not external phenomena, but an expression of social actors' interactions and 'translations' of experience (e.g. quality standard) that assume multifarious forms and practices (cf. Arce 2000).

## Social Interactions and the Construction of Quality

In order to explain the social meaning of quality at the BACWM, Chapters 6 and 7 have illustrated encounters between buyers and sellers through different case-studies. Quality is part of a complex world that goes beyond food attributes (visual features, seasonality and geographical origins) and includes social actors' perceptions and knowledge. It means that the role of grades and standards as strategic instruments of competition (Reardon et al. 2001, Ruben et al. 2006) is only a part of this complexity. The purchase of fresh produce involves multiple exchanges of material and non-material goods, such as knowledge, information, honour and the like (Blau 1964, Homans 1958). The social dimension of quality allows for an understanding of how quality standards are negotiated between growers, buyers and sellers. By identifying and analysing different social practices developed around quality, it is possible to show that different degrees of quality are constructed according to different circumstances and interests of the actors involved in the transaction.

Practices developed by buyers and sellers at the BACWM show that they do not always do things according to the 'official' understanding of quality (Chapters 6 and 7). Buyers and sellers organise their businesses around quality in different ways, depending on what kind of customers they must supply (cf. Ponte and Gibbon 2005). Thus, wholesalers show great flexibility in order to satisfy heterogeneous demands, which vary from supermarkets' logistic quality requirements to cheap and safe fresh produce to owners of greengroceries situated in low-income neighbourhoods. These practices explain that quality is an expression of social interactions.

Chapter 7 has demonstrated that formalising quality into a national system is a complex task that involves a set of normative procedures, policy-makers, experts and particular growers interested in pursuing their own business goals. The case of the new quality standard for avocados shows the difficulties that policy-makers, experts and some growers face in order to implement a homogeneous conception of quality. Despite the official standards, some growers and retailers continue commercialising other varieties that do not always achieve the official standard of quality. This is clearly illustrated at the BACWM, where different qualities and varieties of avocados are sold. The avocado event indicates the significance of the amalgam of local and global insights on the process of qualifying fresh fruit and vegetables. So, it is important to analyse local economic activities, which should no longer be ignored to serve distant interests away from the national 'reality'.

Chapter 7 has also shown how quality is constantly negotiated through social interactions between greengrocers and wholesalers. By following four buyers at the BACWM, it was possible to analyse greengrocers' capacity to deal with complex criteria of quality, creating an economy of variability (de Raymond 2007). Through their interactions with wholesalers, these actors negotiate quality guided by economic and non-economic (commoditised or non-commoditised) elements. Parts of these elements are located in the wider context (public interventions, seasonality, economic crisis, etc.) where these social transactions take place.

At the BACWM, social actors qualify and requalify fresh fruit and vegetables according to their individual knowledge, experience and business acquaintance. These interactions generate heterogeneous assemblages where 'modern' and 'precise' food distribution procedures (large producers and supermarkets) coexist with a variety of 'other' distribution circuits (greengrocers, wholesale distributor, institutional canteen). In other words, by analysing how quality is constructed at the BACWM, this research has shown the coexistence of homogeneous and heterogeneous spaces. Hence, the quality standards become more dynamic processes of negotiation between buyers and sellers. The ethnographic study of this process provides a window to describe and analyse how things are done. The case-studies presented in Chapter 7 have illustrated how 'real' social practices are infinitely more complex than possible models and normative differentiations of quality.

These issues require a complex and contested notion of quality to explain why different groups hold different claims to an apparently 'similar concept of quality'. Consequently, this research study has attempted to localise social interactions and knowledge interface processes in order to understand how quality is constructed by specific groups of actors. This means acknowledging a multiplicity of quality notions, where models and norms are only one of these multiples notions. This focus on local practices includes the effects of important global processes and the impact of large retailers (supermarkets). Encounters between growers and global retailers, between wholesalers and greengrocers and supermarket procurement officers explain the social and political dimensions of quality through the making of different claims. Thus, if we take quality just as a category rather than as a process, we tend to miss the reality of how different groups make claims to quality. In addition, by focusing ethnographically on interactions at the moment of purchase, it was possible to observe how various exchanges take place at the BACWM. Buyers not only buy fresh produce, but also strive to receive discounts, information, and even friendship. Some of these buyers go to the BACWM towards the end of the opening hours in order to negotiate low prices (perishable products). This shows that different kinds of exchanges (bargain, gift, and economic) are also present in the marketplace as expressions of the multiple ways to commercialise products (Bestor 2004, Clark 1994, Kapchan 1996).

By taking on the complex and contested realities present at the BACWM, this thesis has attempted to understand how different social actors have faced changes and challenges in the fresh produce distribution sector over the last

years. This ethnographic study, focused on social practices, has given me the opportunity to challenge the notion of simple, linear, cause-and-effect explanations of change in favour of more social constructivist modes of analysis. Thus, the research has analysed face-to-face as well as larger interactions in order to show how social practices are appropriated and how they integrate distant values, interests and commercial performances. This implied an eight-month period of fieldwork in order to observe and interview a multiplicity of actors involved in the processes of change. Participant observation in situ allows incorporating other social elements that would not be perceived as relevant if the researcher looked at fresh produce distribution as merely a flow of products (i.e. food chain approach).

This thesis has taken a theoretical and political position by paying attention to local language repertoires and expectations. It involved a multiplicity of actors, scenarios and contexts. In some way, this ethnographic study attempted to fill different gaps of information and knowledge about fresh fruit and vegetable distribution in the BACWM. In this vein, the thesis is a pioneer study of a different kind in the field of fresh fruit and vegetable markets distribution. By enacting social practices into economic spaces such as the BACWM, the ethnographic research method may offer a contribution to academics and policy-makers to enlarge their sources of knowledge (cf. Arce and Long 2010, Law and Urry 2004).

# ANNEX

## Programme All Food Is Valuable (2002-2008)

After market hours, the area of pavilions and *playas libres* is visited by poor people who look for fresh produce lying on the floor and in containers. However, during the economic crisis of 2001 (Del Piero 2003, Svampa and Pereyra 2003) between 800 and 1,200 people started to go spontaneously and frequently to the BACWM for picking up fresh produce from containers or asking wholesalers for rests. Besides obtaining these products for their own consumption, a few of them would prepare fruit salads for sale in their own neighbourhoods (Kinigsberg 2002).

The overwhelming visits by homeless and jobless people were not always peaceful; occasionally, there would be fights over fruit or vegetables (Interviews 3, 75). [56] Consequently, the spontaneous and disorganised

[56] It is worth noting that these negotiations are not related to the incident described in Chapter 3, where unemployed people organised in a social movement called *piqueteros* decided to go and ask for fresh fruit and vegetables at the BACWM in January 2002 (Galván 2002).

collection of the 'wasted' fresh produce was a sign of worry for the authorities of the BACWM. On the initiative of one of the chairmen, some employees of the BACWM Corporation contacted the spontaneous 'pickers' to organise the collection, to make the activity less humiliating and to guarantee sanitary conditions (Del Piero 2003, Kinigsberg 2002). The result of these interactions between 'pickers' and civil servants was a programme called 'All Food Is Valuable', carried out by 15 unemployed people organised as a non-governmental organisation (NGO). This programme started operating in 2002 at Platform 3 of the BACWM's out-of-use railway and continued until 2008.

Before the economic crisis of 2001, the distribution of fresh fruit and vegetables in edible conditions but out of the commercial circuits was organised by the BACWM Corporation and Cáritas (Catholic charitable organization). Thus, the reorganisation of the distribution of the non-commercial fresh produce was not devoid of disagreements between civil servants, chairmen and wholesalers. Wholesalers asked for proof of fresh produce destruction in order to face possible claims from the growers who allocate their production on consignment. Some civil servants were reluctant to the donation because of inadequate sanitary and quality control. BACWM's users also wanted to avoid potential sales through informal commercial channels (Interviews 3, 37, 18). During my interviews, a civil servant commented:

> 'The idea came from the directors of the BACWM Corporation to the inspection area. Of course, Mr. F [a civil servant at a high position] agreed with politicians. Mr. F used to be my friend, but he disappointed me, playing a double game. He tried to be a good technician and a politician, but then he chose the politicians. Why did we change the old organisation? Because politicians wanted to show they did something for the poor people' (Interview 37, 5 December 2007).

The clash of ideas over the organisation of the distribution of these products shows part of the difficult relationships that developed between civil servants and chairmen at the BACWM (see Chapter 5). In this case, both civil servants faced the new project in different ways. One preferred to ingratiate policy-makers and to improve social conditions of poor people by calling wholesalers for a social accountability, whereas the other (at a lower position) complained about his colleague's behaviour by reacting against the prevalence of political decisions over technical criteria. According to the civil servant interviewed, this situation does not allow them to improve their technical careers. For instance, he argued that an important role of inspectors should be to control the sanitary aspects during the distribution of fresh produce from the stalls to Platform 3. Since this was a potentially hazardous activity, supervision by technicians should prevail over the anarchic/disorganised way used by people belonging to the NGO. However, it seems that the programme 'All Food Is Valuable' was concerned more with political affairs than with poverty alleviation.

Despite the confrontations, the NGO was created with the purpose of organising the picking of fresh produce, and of supplying boxes to other NGOs or families without jobs. In the beginning, the members of the NGO received training from technicians of the Buenos Aires Ministry of Welfare (Del Piero 2003). Although they had other inspirations like setting up a garden, they actually achieved to supply fresh produce to different soup-kitchens throughout the metropolitan area of Buenos Aires (Interview 3).

Although the worst moment of the economic crisis was over, the activity at Platform 3 continued until 2008. Its discontinuity was due to a variety of causes related to the lack of merchandise donated, demand shortage and little management from the BACWM Corporation. However, the experience of the programme is worth noting as an illustration of the multiple ways of fresh fruit and vegetable distribution developed at the BACWM.

The programme's activities were developed as follows: two BACWM Corporation employees were in charge of collecting fresh produce from donor wholesalers and of bringing them to the railway platform. In addition, inspectors – in charge of quality and sanitary controls – were able to send products that wholesalers considered unsuitable for selling to Platform 3 (Chapter 3). Every Tuesday, Thursday and Friday, fresh produce was selected, cleaned and packaged by the 15 people at Platform 3. These people arrived at 6 AM and after 11 AM they were ready to distribute the boxes to other NGOs. The presence of a policeman was part of the programme as a symbol of order in case of disturbances.

The NGO had to work in poor facility conditions. The platform did not have any protection against the harsh weather, except for a roof. People manipulated fresh produce without any sanitary care such as gloves or aprons. Although a civil servant and a policeman were part of the programme, the activity seemed to be controlled by people from the NGO without any criteria of cleanliness. Elvira, one of the NGO members, explained how they organised the activity at Platform 3:

> 'We [referring to the NGO] officially started on 26 November 2002. We gave food to 1,000 poor families; before, they would pick it up from containers full of viruses or microbes. I was one of these people. And looking for food through containers is a denigrating activity, isn't it? So, people from above [referring to the authorities of the BACWM Corporation] decided to organise the collection.'
>
> 'We work with donations from wholesalers. Without their help we can't do anything. As volunteers, we receive more food, but were not paid for our labour. Nowadays, three of the old pioneers continue to work here, the rest are new. The number and kind of people that come to work as volunteers vary throughout the months, since it is dependent on whether they are able to find other, paid, temporary jobs. I work here to help the soup-kitchen of my neighbourhood in Merlo' (Interview 3 – 9th March 2007.

Elvira's explanation demonstrates the importance of wholesalers' contributions since the programme depended on the goodwill of wholesalers to instruct employees to pick the products that they did not sell. She recognised that the programme's operation was not simple, and most of the time obstacles were put in their way by the BACWM civil servants who were against the sanitary conditions of this distribution system.

The NGO distributed between 50 and 80 boxes of fresh produce (selected and cleaned) to people who came to Platform 3. So, they supplied more than 1,000 kilos to every soup-kitchen asking for food every week. Since the amount of fresh fruit and vegetables distributed was considerably high, some wholesalers and civil servants at the BACWM Corporation suspected that some of the donations were transformed into a business with few beneficiaries. One wholesaler pointed out:

> 'I am not so sure about this. I phone the Administration and they come to pick up the produce that I can't sell because of its physical appearance, but they are edible products. After they unload the produce at Platform 3, they have to return the wooden boxes to me because I need them for my suppliers. One day I asked for the boxes and nobody knew where they were. It means that the produce did not arrive at Platform 3' (Interview 18a, 7 December 2007).

The distribution of fresh produce to Platform 3 seemed to be an unimportant activity for the wholesalers of the BACWM. Although they collaborated by way of donations, they did not relate to it in terms of their social accountability as entrepreneurs.

The programme 'All Food Is Valuable' is an illustration of how multiple and different groups of people and elements contribute to create the diverse ways of fresh fruit and vegetable circulation in the metropolitan area of Buenos Aires. The variability in circulation allows the BACWM to be represented as a space that goes beyond mere commercial exchange.

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# SUMMARY

This research explores ethnographically the everyday social interactions between the 'users' of a particular marketplace, the Buenos Aires Central Wholesale Market (BACWM). The 'users' of this marketplace are the social actors who work there everyday (chairmen, wholesalers, vendors, civil servants, porters, odd-jobbers, pedlars, etc.), and who bring (growers, middlemen) and buy fresh produce (other wholesalers, greengrocers, supermarket procurement officers, restaurant owners, street vendors and so on); it also includes others who go, for instance, to pick up fresh produce from the rubbish at closing hours. These ´users´ are the ´makers´ of the BACWM since, through their everyday practices, interactions and interpretations and knowledge, they socially construct this hub of distribution.

The choice of the BACWM as the object of study is based on its central role in the distribution of fresh fruit and vegetables in Argentina. This marketplace supplies to more than 11 million consumers, receives about 13,000 trucks per week from different production areas, both within and outside the country, and moves more than 1 million tons of fresh produce a year. Thus, this marketplace provides an interesting window on the complex changes

occurring in the fresh produce net-chain in Argentina over the last years. By focusing on the interactions between people and the effect of these interactions on the distribution of fresh produce, this thesis addresses the following question: how do the 'makers' of the BACWM face changes in a context of fresh fruit and vegetable distribution?

By paying attention to local everyday social practices, it is possible to explain how multiple ways of fresh produce circulation are generated at the BACWM. This marketplace is a social product located not in one social space but in many, in fact, by an unlimited or multiple or uncountable set of social spaces, since its users perceived, conceived of and lived in this marketplace in different ways. It means that economic, social and cultural activities are embedded in an assemblage of people, fresh produce, trolleys, laboratory devices, phone cables, trucks, and so on that cannot be explained in terms of the flow of products alone.

Policy-makers conceive of the BACWM as an abstract space and try to control the everyday social practices developed around the fresh produce circulation through their own criteria of order. However, actors involved in economic transactions, such as wholesalers, vendors, buyers and porters, act according to their own conceptions of the marketplace. These complex social relations make it possible for the BACWM to be at once a place of chaos and of order.

The organisation of the BACWM is analysed through social interactions that involve both face-to-face and distanced relations. These relations allow for exchanges of material goods, such as fresh produce, money, boxes and bills, and non-material goods, such as knowledge, information, honour, feeling, passion and prestige. Hence, interpersonal networks cross-cut different points of reference that surpass rational explanations. Social encounters at the BACWM are full of social, cultural and economic discrepancies. They may involve the interplay of different 'worlds of knowledge', such as of wholesalers, civil servants, growers and buyers. These encounters cannot be studied as a linear and static process since they are the result of various struggles for power and knowledge.

Studies of encounters at the interface show how actors' goals, interests and relationships are reinforced or reshaped by processes of interaction that go beyond face-to-face relationships and are in part affected by other actors, institutional and cultural frameworks, and resources that may not actually be physically or directly present. Social interactions at the interface have the potential to generate something other, an unplanned consequence. Hence, multiple interactions developed at the BACWM can promote contested realities, such as the proliferation of ways of distributing fresh produce and of organising wholesale activities.

The thesis is divided into eight chapters. Chapter 1 offers a general introduction to the research theme by analysing previous studies of wholesale markets and the latest food study approaches. By taking into account the expression of the global in local processes, this thesis strives to explain heterogeneities and diversities in rural and food spaces. The starting point of

this research is the coexistence of different understandings and interpretations of experience. These multiple realities can be analysed only through an ethnographic understanding of everyday life, particularly in social interactions.

The BACWM is seen as a stage on which the set, the actors, the actions, the theatre and even the audience are constantly under (re)construction. The stage is a useful metaphor to analyse the different performances of each actor involved in fresh produce distribution and to understand the complexity. So, the thesis moves away from a description of the flow of products towards how different ways of fresh produce circulation are built through multiple social interactions.

Chapter 1 also offers an explanation of my work in the field and the process of reflexion, which enabled me to analyse the BACWM from the social actors´ practices and their frames of references, including my own point of view. The reflexive process between acts observed and my readings allowed me to analyse the BACWM situation without taking sides or distinguishing on a priori grounds between dichotomies such as 'modern'/'traditional'.

Through empirical evidence, Chapter 2 proves that the BACWM is the result of different negotiations and cognitive struggles between policy-makers, civil servants, growers, porters and wholesalers. They have been developed multiple interactions in order to surpass uncertainties since the inauguration of the BACWM (1984). The baggage of experience and knowledge of BACWM users allow them to easily adapt and start working at the BACWM. They were able to face the uncertainties of the new marketplace by constructing and reconstructing old and new networks.

Chapter 3 describes both the facilities and the everyday practices of particular social groups working at this marketplace. This description attempts to situate the reader at the scene where social actors create their own domains. Domains are central methodologically in order to understand how social and symbolic boundaries are created and defended at the BACWM. They represent for people some shared values that absolve actors from the need to explain themselves to each other. Despite the use of a common language, they do not always share the same representations, intentions and interests. In sum, Chapter 3 shows that the BACWM is more than a group of buildings and facilities and a commercial space where fresh fruit and vegetable are sold; the BACWM is a place of livelihood for most of its users.

Chapter 4 presents the wholesalers as a heterogeneous group with its multiple realities. The wholesalers are the backbone of fresh produce distribution as they have the capacity to build networks with different kinds of social actors, opening up the BACWM to growers, retailers (greengrocers and supermarkets) and food-service entrepreneurs (hotels, restaurants and institutions).

The individual biographies and practices of wholesalers explain in part how they are able to survive and even do good business in challenging times. Their multiple practices and creative strategies are related to their different ways of learning and the capacities to construct networks and invest in facilities,

primary production, logistics and brands. Wholesalers strive to sell not only fresh fruit and vegetables but also their 'brand-name', offering good service and quality to their suppliers and buyers. This variety in strategies gives opportunity to small as well as large growers and buyers to fulfil their economic expectations.

By focusing on wholesalers', civil servants' and chairmen's discourses and interactions, Chapter 5 shows that the BACWM is a place where discipline and order (hierarchy, abstract spaces) attempt to overcome the heterogeneous associations of people intertwined in multiple interactions. Norms and regulations implemented by the hierarchy give rise to different reactions from wholesalers, generating multiple conceptions of how to organise the BACWM. These ideas about organisation vary from complete control to horizontal network activities.

Social discourses give the impression that hierarchy is linked to the visibility of the BACWM's organisation, represented by the activities of chairmen and civil servants (the so-called 'public' sphere), while horizontal and informal relationships are related to business matters (the so-called 'private' sphere). Wholesalers classify themselves as 'private sector', efficient and competent actors and they exchange symbols of disapproval for the way in which the administration is organised. The interface stresses the dynamic and potentially conflictive nature of social interactions. In this case, between the hierarchy (BACWM's administrators) and the workers' network there is a battle of interests and power to impose each's own criteria of 'order'.

Chapters 6 and 7 focus on the interactions between wholesalers and buyers. Chapter 6 gives a clear example of how 'external' or geographically distant actors shape social processes, strategies and actions at the BACWM. This is illustrated through the evolution of the interactions between specialised wholesalers and supermarket procurement officers. These social actors cope with the reorganisation of fresh produce distribution in a new competitive space. By giving close attention to their practices, this chapter analyses how knowledge is internalised, used and reconstructed.

By tracking social actors' practices, Chapter 7 explains the construction of quality through the interactions between wholesalers and their buyers. Quality is constantly negotiated through social interactions. Buyers' capacity to deal with complex criteria of quality generates an economy of variability guided by economic and non-economic elements. Parts of these elements are located in the wider context (public interventions, seasonality, economic crisis, etc.) where these social transactions take place.

At the BACWM, social actors qualify and re-qualify fresh fruit and vegetables according to their individual knowledge, experiences and business acquaintances. These interactions generate heterogeneous assemblages where 'modern' and 'precise' food distribution procedures (large producers and supermarkets) coexist with a variety of 'other' distribution circuits (greengrocers, wholesale distributor, food services). In other words, by

analysing how quality is constructed at the BACWM, this research has shown the coexistence of homogeneous and heterogeneous spaces.

Finally, Chapter 8 presents the main conclusion and discussion of the book. By paying attention to the social actors' practices, it is possible to note that the BACWM's resilience is based on the complex and heterogeneous interactions developed between different actors. This complex and shifting assemblage has allowed the BACWM to survive and face a variety of crises over the years.

In sum, by enacting social practices into economic spaces such as the BACWM, this thesis may encourage academics and policy-makers to enlarge their sources of knowledge about the complex and multiple ways of distributing fresh produce in the Buenos Aires Metropolitan area.

# RESUMEN

Este trabajo de investigación explora etnográficamente las interacciones sociales entre los ´usuarios´ del Mercado Central de Buenos Aires (MCBA). Los ´usuarios´ de este mercado son diferentes actores sociales que trabajan diariamente allí (administradores, mayoristas, vendedores, funcionarios públicos, changarines, peones, vendedores ambulantes, etc.), que llevan (productores, transportistas, e intermediarios) compran frutas y verduras frescas (otros mayoristas, verduleros, encargados de compras de supermercados, dueños de restaurantes y otros servicios alimentarios, feriantes, etc.) y que recogen los productos de descarte a la hora del cierre del mercado. Los ´usuarios´ del mercado son los que construyen este espacio socialmente a través de sus prácticas diarias de interacción e intercambio de conocimientos e ideas.

La elección del MCBA como objeto de estudio está basada en su rol central en la distribución de frutas y hortalizas en la Argentina. Este mercado provee a más de 11 millones de consumidores, recibe desde diferentes áreas de producción cerca de 13.000 camiones por semana y comercializa anualmente más de 1 millón de toneladas de frutas y hortalizas. El MCBA constituye una interesante ventana para analizar los complejos cambios ocurridos en la comercialización de las frutas y hortalizas en la Argentina durante los últimos

años. Focalizando en las interacciones sociales entre las personas y el efecto de dichas interacciones sobre la distribución de frutas y hortalizas, esta tesis busca responder la siguiente pregunta: ¿Cómo los ´constructores´ del MCBA afrontan cambios en el contexto de distribución de frutas y hortalizas?

Prestando atención a las prácticas sociales cotidianas y locales es posible explicar cómo se generan múltiples formas de distribución en el MCBA. Dichas prácticas muestran que el MCBA es un producto social localizado en más de un espacio social, generando ilimitados, múltiples o incontables conjuntos de espacios sociales. Y esto se vincula con las diferentes formas que sus usuarios perciben, conciben y viven el MCBA. Esto significa que las actividades económicas, sociales y culturales están embebidas en un ensamble de gente, de frutas y hortalizas, carros, elementos de laboratorio, cables de teléfono, camiones y otros elementos que no pueden ser explicados solamente desde una perspectiva de flujo de productos. Este ensamble entonces se puede explicar a través de los propios actores involucrados.

Los hacedores de políticas conciben al MCBA como un espacio abstracto que requiere control. El control de las prácticas cotidianas desarrolladas alrededor de la comercialización de las frutas y hortalizas es percibido como un objetivo para alcanzar eficiencia. Sin embargo, los actores sociales relacionados con dicha actividad (mayoristas, vendedores, compradores, changarines) actúan de acuerdo a sus propias concepciones de mercado que difieren de las concepciones de los hacedores de política. Estas complejas relaciones sociales hacen posible que el MCBA sea un lugar de caos y orden al mismo tiempo.

En esta tesis, la organización del MCBA es analizada a través de las interacciones sociales que envuelven tanto relaciones cara a cara como relaciones a distancia. Estas relaciones permiten intercambiar bienes materiales como productos frescos, dinero, cajones o boletas de compra venta y bienes no materiales tales como conocimiento, información, honor, y sentimientos como pasión y prestigio. En otras palabras, las interacciones sociales se desarrollan desde la racionalidad e irracionalidad de los actores. Los encuentros sociales en el MCBA encierran discrepancias de todo tipo tanto sociales, económicas como culturales, y a su vez se diferencian en diferentes mundos o dominios (mayoristas, funcionarios, productores o compradores). Esta complejidad requiere de una explicación no linear y dinámica ya que los encuentros sociales desarrollados en el MCBA son resultado de varias luchas de poder y conocimiento.

El fenómeno de interfaz muestra cómo procesos de interacción (encuentros sociales) reconstruyen o reformulan los diferentes objetivos, intereses y relaciones de cada uno de los actores involucrados. Estos encuentros van más allá de relaciones cara a cara, viéndose afectados por otros actores, instituciones o marcos culturales y/o recursos que no necesariamente se hallan presentes durante el intercambio de ideas o posiciones. Estas interacciones sociales (interfaces) tienen la potencialidad de generar otra cosa, algo no planeado. Por eso, múltiples interacciones desarrolladas en el MCBA pueden promover más de un modo de distribuir frutas y hortalizas,

modos no planeados o inesperados que complejizan el mundo de la distribución.

Esta tesis está dividida en ocho capítulos. Capítulo 1 ofrece una introducción general al tema de investigación analizando, en primer lugar, estudios sobre mercados mayoristas, para luego considerar los últimos enfoques utilizados para estudiar la problemática alimentaria. Teniendo en cuanta la expresión de lo global en lo local, esta investigación intenta explicar heterogeneidades y diversidades en espacios rurales y alimentarios a partir de un trabajo etnográfico que muestra la coexistencia de diferentes entendimientos e interpretaciones de la realidad (múltiples realidades) en un mismo espacio. La etnografía realizada focaliza en las prácticas sociales, particularmente en las interacciones sociales.

El MCBA es analizado como un escenario donde la escena, los actores, las acciones, el teatro y la audiencia están constantemente en (re)construcción. El escenario es una metáfora conveniente para analizar y entender la complejidad de las diferentes acciones y actividades de cada uno de los actores sociales involucrados en la distribución de frutas y hortalizas. Al considerar como se construyen los diferentes circuitos de comercialización a través de múltiples interacciones sociales, esta tesis va más allá de una mera descripción de un flujo de productos.

El Capítulo 1 además ofrece una explicación del trabajo de campo y del proceso de reflexión llevado a cabo durante el transcurso de la investigación. Esto permitió analizar al MCBA desde la perspectiva de los actores involucrados, inclusive desde mi propia visión como investigadora. El proceso de reflexión entre actos observados y mis lecturas me permitió analizar la situación del MCBA sin tomar partido o distinguir campos a priori entre dicotomías tales como ´moderno´/´tradicional´.

Mediante evidencia empírica, el Capítulo 2 demuestra que el MCBA es el resultado de diferentes negociaciones y disputas entre hacedores de políticas, funcionarios, productores, changarines y mayoristas. Desde la inauguración del MCBA, estos actores han desarrollado múltiples interacciones. El bagaje de experiencia y conocimiento de muchos de los usuarios de este mercado les ha permitido adaptarse fácilmente a los nuevos y continuos cambios, así como construir y reconstruir viejas y nuevas redes sociales para superar incertidumbres tanto económicas, sociales como políticas.

El Capítulo 3 describe tanto las características de los edificios que conforman el MCBA como las prácticas cotidianas de algunos actores sociales que trabajan diariamente allí. Esta descripción busca situar al lector en el escenario donde los actores sociales crean sus propios dominios. Metodológicamente, los dominios son centrales para entender cómo los límites sociales y simbólicos son creados y defendidos por dichos actores en el MCBA. Los dominios le representan a las personas ciertos valores compartidos que los absuelven de la necesidad de explicarlos. A pesar de un uso común de lenguaje, estos grupos sociales no siempre comparten las mismas significaciones, intenciones e intereses. En síntesis, el Capítulo 3 muestra que

el MCBA es más que un grupo de edificios e infraestructura donde se venden frutas y hortalizas, el MCBA representa un modo de vida para muchos de sus usuarios.

En el Capítulo 4 los mayoristas son caracterizados como un grupo heterogéneo con sus múltiples realidades. Los mayoristas son centrales en la distribución de frutas y hortalizas, siendo los actores con mayor capacidad para crear y mantener redes con diferentes tipos de actores sociales, abriendo el mercado a productores, minoristas (feriantes, verduleros y supermercados) y empresas de servicios alimentarios (hoteles, restaurantes, e instituciones).

Las biografías y prácticas de los mayoristas explican en parte, cómo ellos logran sobrevivir y más aún hacer buenos negocios en tiempos de desafíos. Sus múltiples prácticas y creativas estrategias están vinculadas directamente con sus diferentes maneras de aprender, su capacidad para construir redes sociales así como invertir en infraestructura, producción primaria, logística o en bienes intangibles como las marcas. Los mayoristas se esmeran no sólo en vender frutas y hortalizas sino también en sustentar su propio ´prestigio de marca´, ofreciendo buena calidad de servicios a sus proveedores y compradores. Esta variedad de estrategias permite que tanto pequeños como grandes productores y compradores alcancen sus objetivos de acuerdo a sus propias expectativas económicas.

Focalizando en los discursos e interacciones entre mayoristas, funcionarios y directores de la Corporación del MCBA, el Capítulo 5 muestra que el Mercado Central es un sitio donde la disciplina y el orden (jerarquía, espacio abstracto) buscan lidiar con las asociaciones heterogéneas de personas conectadas mediante múltiples interacciones. Las normas y regulaciones implementadas por la jerarquía generan contra reacciones por parte de otros usuarios del MCBA con diferentes concepciones acerca de cómo organizar la distribución de frutas y hortalizas. Estas ideas acerca de la organización del MCBA varían desde una concepción de completo control a relaciones horizontales y menos jerárquicas.

Los discursos utilizados por los usuarios del MCBA dan la impresión que lo jerárquico está vinculado con la visibilidad de la organización de este mercado, representada por las actividades de los directivos y funcionarios (la llamada esfera ´pública´), mientras que las relaciones más horizontales e informales están asociadas a negocios (la llamada esfera ´privada´). Los mayoristas se clasifican a sí mismos como ´privados´, y por lo tanto, eficientes y competentes, intercambiando símbolos de desaprobación hacia la forma que es administrado el mercado. Este encuentro de interfaz (mundos diferentes) remarca el dinámico y potencial conflicto de la relación entre los administrativos y otros usuarios del MCBA con diferentes intereses y criterios de orden.

Los Capítulos 6 y 7 centran su atención en las interacciones desarrolladas entre los mayoristas y los compradores. El Capítulo 6 explica cómo los actores ´externos´ o geográficamente distantes, como los supermercados, también influyen en los procesos de cambio desarrollados en el MCBA. Esto es ilustrado

a través del análisis de la evolución de las interacciones mantenidas entre mayoristas especializados y encargados de compras de los supermercados. Ambos actores sociales logran exitosamente la reorganización de la distribución de frutas y hortalizas, generando un nuevo espacio de competitividad. Analizando etnográficamente estas interacciones, el Capítulo 6 muestra cómo el conocimiento es internalizado, usado y reconstruido.

Siguiendo las prácticas sociales de minoristas que compran en el MCBA, el capítulo 7 explica la construcción de la calidad a través de las interacciones entre estos compradores y los mayoristas. La capacidad de los compradores para lidiar con múltiples criterios de calidad permite generar una economía de variabilidad guiada tanto por elementos económicos como no económicos, que hacen parte de un contexto más amplio (intervenciones públicas, estacionalidad de la producción de frutas y hortalizas, crisis económicas nacionales, etc.) que influencia de alguna forma a las interacciones comerciales llevadas a cabo en el MCBA.

Los actores sociales califican y re-califican a las frutas y hortalizas de acuerdo a su propio conocimiento, experiencia y conocimiento del negocio. Estas interacciones generan heterogéneos ensambles donde los procedimientos de una distribución ´moderna´ y ´precisa´ (grandes e innovadores productores, supermercados) se entremezclan con una variedad de ´otros´ circuitos de distribución (verduleros, feriantes, distribuidores, servicios alimentarios, etc.). En otras palabras, el capítulo muestra cómo las diferentes formas de construir calidad en el MCBA permiten la coexistencia de espacios homogéneos y heterogéneos al mismo tiempo.

Finalmente, el Capítulo 8 presenta las conclusiones y discusiones de esta tesis. Las interacciones complejas y heterogéneas desarrolladas por múltiples y diferentes usuarios del MCBA hacen que dicho mercado sobreviva a los cambios y desafíos a lo largo de los últimos años. En síntesis, analizar espacios económicos como el MCBA desde las prácticas sociales, particularmente desde las interacciones, nos permite ofrecer al mundo académico y político una mirada más amplia y compleja de las múltiples formas de distribución de frutas y hortalizas desarrolladas desde el MCBA.

# SAMENVATTING

Dit onderzoek belicht op een etnografische manier de dagelijkse interactie tussen de 'gebruikers' van een specifieke marktplaats, de Buenos Aires Centrale Groothandel Markt (BACWM). De 'gebruikers' van deze markt zijn de sociale actoren die er elke dag werken (voorzitters, grossiers, verkopers, ambtenaren, kruiers, mensen die karweitjes aanpakken, straatventers, enz.), en die verse producten brengen (producenten en tussenhandelaren) en opkopen (andere groothandelaren, grossiers, supermarkt bevoorrading medewerkers, restaurant eigenaren, straat verkopers en ga zo maar door); het betreft ook anderen die, bijvoorbeeld, na sluitingstijd verse producten uit het afval meenemen. Deze 'gebruikers' zijn tevens de 'makers' van de BACWM aangezien zij, door hun dagelijkse praktijken, interacties en interpretaties en kennis, deze distributie plek sociaal construeren.

De keuze voor de BACWM als studie object komt voort uit zijn centrale rol in de distributie van vers fruit en groenten in Argentinië. Deze marktplaats bevoorraadt meer dan 11 miljoen consumenten, ontvangt 13.000 vrachtwagens per week vanuit verschillende productiegebieden, in zowel binnen- en buitenland en verplaatst meer dan 1 miljoen ton aan verse producten per jaar. Daarom biedt deze marktplaats een interessante inkijk in

de complexe veranderingen in de versproductieketen in Argentinië in de afgelopen jaren. Door te focussen op de interacties tussen mensen en het effect van deze interacties op de distributie van verse producten, richt deze thesis zich op de volgende vraag: hoe gaan de 'makers' van de BACWM om met veranderingen met betrekking tot de distributie van vers fruit en verse groenten?

Door aandacht te besteden aan de lokale praktijken van alle dag, is het mogelijk om uit te leggen hoe verschillende manieren van circulatie van verse producten ontstaan vanuit de BACWM. Deze marktplaats is een sociaal product dat zich niet op een enkele plek bevindt, maar in feite in oneindige of meerdere of ontelbare aantallen sociale ruimten, aangezien haar gebruikers deze marktplaats op verschillende manieren ervaren, meemaken en beleven. Dit betekent dat economische, sociale en culturele activiteiten ingebed zijn in een assemblage van mensen, verse producten, trollies, laboratorium apparaten, telefoonkabels, vrachtwagens enzovoort, die niet alleen kunnen worden verklaard in termen van goederenstromen.

Beleidsmakers zien de BACWM als een abstracte ruimte en ze proberen de alledaagse sociale praktijken rondom de circulatie van verse producten te controleren en beheersen met behulp van hun eigen criteria voor ordehandhaving. Echter, actoren die betrokken zijn in economische transacties, zoals grossiers, verkopers, kopers en kruiers, gedragen zich naar gelang eigen interpretatie van de marktplaats. Deze complexe sociale relaties maken het mogelijk voor de BACWM om tegelijkertijd orde en chaos in zich te hebben.

De organisatie van de BCAWM is geanalyseerd door middel van de sociale interacties, waarbij het gaat om zowel persoonlijke als zakelijke relaties. Deze relaties maken de uitwisseling van materiële goederen, zoals verse producten, geld, dozen en rekeningen en niet materiële zaken, zoals kennis, informatie, eer, gevoelens, passie en prestige. Vandaar dat inter-persoonlijke netwerken raken aan verschillende referentiekaders en voorbijgaan aan rationele verklaringen. Sociale ontmoetingen op de BACWM zijn dan ook vol van sociale, culturele en economische tegenstrijdigheden. Soms hebben ze betrekking op het samenspel tussen verschillende 'werelden van kennis', zoals bij groothandelaren, ambtenaren, producenten en kopers. Deze ontmoetingen kunnen niet als lineaire of statische processen bestudeerd worden, aangezien ze het resultaat zijn van verschillende macht- en kennis conflicten.

Studies van ontmoetingen op het raakvlak tonen de doelen van de actoren, hun belangen en hun relaties worden gevormd en herschapen door het proces van interactie die verder gaat dan persoonlijke relaties die op hun beurt weer beïnvloed worden door andere actoren, institutionele raamwerken en middelen die misschien niet fysiek of direct aanwezig zijn. Sociale interacties op het raakvlak hebben de potentie om zomaar iets te genereren: een ongeplande consequentie. Daarom kunnen de verschillende interacties die ontstaan op de BACWM verschillende realiteiten met zich meebrengen, zoals het voortbrengen van manieren van distributie van verse producten en het organiseren van groothandel activiteiten.

De thesis is verdeeld in acht hoofdstukken. Hoofdstuk 1 biedt een algemene introductie op het onderzoeksthema door eerdere studies ten aanzien van de groothandel markten en recente studies op het gebied van voeding te behandelen. Door aandacht te besteden aan het globale binnen lokale processen, wordt er in dit proefschrift getracht om verscheidenheid en diversiteit in rurale plekken en plekken waar voedsel geproduceerd wordt. Het startpunt van dit onderzoek is het naast elkaar bestaan van verschillende percepties en interpretaties van ervaringen. Deze verschillende realiteiten kunnen geanalyseerd worden door middel van een etnografisch begrip van het dagelijks leven, en in het bijzonder sociale interacties.

Het BACWM kan gezien worden als een podium waarop de set, de acteurs, de acties, het theater en zelfs het publiek continue aan verandering onderhevig zijn. Het podium is een handige metafoor om de verschillende optredens van elke actor betrokken in de verse producten handel en een middel om de complexiteit ervan te begrijpen. Op deze manier verschuift de focus in deze thesis van een beschrijving van de goederenstroom naar de verschillende manieren waarop de verse productencirculatie tot stand komt door verschillende sociale interacties.

Hoofdstuk 1 biedt ook een beschrijving van mijn veldwerk en het proces van reflectie, wat het mogelijk maakte om de BCAWM te analyseren vanuit het perspectief van de praktijken van de sociale actoren en hun referentiekaders, inclusief mijn eigen gezichtspunt. Het reflectieproces tussen de waargenomen handelingen en mijn begrip ervan maakte het mogelijk om de BACWM situatie te analyseren zonder een kant te kiezen of op voorhand onderscheid te maken tussen dichotomieën als modern versus traditioneel.

Met behulp van empirisch materiaal, wordt in Hoofdstuk 2 aangetoond dat de BACWM het resultaat is van verschillende onderhandelingen en de strijd tussen beleidsmakers, ambtenaren, producenten, sjouwers en groothandelaren. Ze zijn ontstaan door verschillende interacties om zo de onzekerheden sinds de oprichting van de BACWM (1984) te kunnen overkomen. De kennis en ervaring van de BACWM gebruikers maakt het hen mogelijk om zich gemakkelijk aan te passen en het werk bij de BACWM aan te vangen. Ze konden de onzekerheden van de nieuwe marktplaats aan door nieuwe netwerken te construeren en oude netwerken te versterken.

Hoofdstuk 3 gaat in op de faciliteiten en de dagelijkse praktijken van bepaalde sociale groepen die op deze marktplaats werken. Met deze beschrijving wordt getracht de lezer aan de hand te nemen naar de plek waar de sociale actoren hun eigen domeinen creëren. Deze domeinen zijn methodologisch gezien van belang om zo te kunnen begrijpen hoe sociale en symbolische grenzen gerecreëerd worden en verdedigd worden binnen de BACWM. Ze vertegenwoordigen gemeenschappelijke waarden waardoor de actoren zichzelf niet nader hoeven verklaren aan elkaar. Ondanks het gebruik van een gemeenschappelijke taal hebben ze niet altijd dezelfde vertegenwoordiging, belangen en interesses. Kortom, Hoofdstuk 3 laat zien dat de BACWM meer is dan een groep gebouwen en faciliteiten en een

commerciële plek waar vers fruit en verse groenten worden verkocht; de BACWM betekent het levensonderhoud voor de meeste gebruikers.

Hoofdstuk 4 beschrijft de groothandelaren als een heterogene groep met verschillende realiteiten. De groothandelaren zijn de ruggengraat van de distributie van de verse producten, aangezien ze in staat zijn om netwerken op te bouwen met verschillende soorten sociale actoren, waarmee ze de BACWM toegankelijk maken voor telers, handelaren (groenteboeren en supermarkten en ondernemers op het gebied van voedselvoorziening (hotels, restaurants en instellingen).

De individuele biografieën en praktijken van de groothandelaren geven weer hoe ze kunnen overleven en zelfs goede zaken doen in moeilijke tijden. Hun verscheidene handelingen en creatieve strategieën zijn gekoppeld aan verschillende manieren waarop ze leren en hun capaciteiten om netwerken te creëren en te investeren in faciliteiten, primaire productie, logistiek en handelsmerken. Groothandelaren steven ernaar om niet alleen vers fruit en verse groenten te verkopen, maar ook hun handelsmerk, waarmee ze goede service en kwaliteit bieden aan hun leveranciers en kopers. Deze diversiteit aan strategieën geeft de mogelijkheid aan zowel kleine als grote telers en kopers om te voorzien in hun economische verwachtingen.

Door te focussen op de discoursen van groothandelaren, ambtenaren en voorzitters en hun wisselwerkingen, laat Hoofdstuk 5 zien dat de BACWM een plek is waar discipline en orde (hiërarchie, abstracte ruimtes) de heterogene verbintenissen tussen mensen, verwikkeld in verschillende interacties, proberen te bedwingen. Normen en regels die door de hiërarchie worden afgedwongen bewerkstelligen verschillende reacties van de groothandelaren, waardoor verschillende opvattingen over hoe de BACWM georganiseerd moet worden, opgeroepen worden. Deze ideeën over de organisatie variëren van enerzijds totale controle tot anderzijds horizontale netwerk activiteiten.

Sociale discoursen geven de indruk dat hiërarchie verbonden is aan zichtbaarheid van de organisatie van de BACWM, vertegenwoordigd door de activiteiten van voorzitters, ambtenaren (de zogenaamde publieke sfeer), terwijl horizontale en informele relaties verband houden met zakelijke doeleinden (de zogeheten private sfeer).

Groothandelaren classificeren zichzelf als de ‘ private sector’, efficiënte en competente actoren, en uiten hun afkeuring over hoe de administratie is georganiseerd. Dit raakvlak bevestigt de dynamiek en mogelijke tegenstrijdige aard van de sociale interacties. In dit geval is er tussen de hiërarchie (BACWM administrateurs) en het netwerk van de werkers een belangenstrijd en machtstrijd gaande waarin ze elkaars criteria van ‘orde’ proberen op te leggen.

Hoofdstuk 6 en 7 gaan in op de wisselwerking tussen de groothandelaren en opkopers. Hoofdstuk 6 geeft een duidelijk voorbeeld van hoe 'externe' of geografisch van elkaar verwijderde actoren sociale processen, strategieën en acties in de BACWM vormgeven. Dit wordt geïllustreerd door de evolutie van de interacties tussen de groothandelaren en supermarkt bevoorradingsmedewerkers.

Deze sociale actoren hebben te maken met de reorganisatie van de distributie van verse producten in een nieuwe competitieve ruimte. Door aandacht te besteden aan hun handelen, analyseert dit hoofdstuk hoe kennis geïnternaliseerd wordt, gebruikt wordt en tot stand komt.

Door het handelen van de sociale actoren te volgen, legt hoofdstuk 7 uit hoe kwaliteit tot stand komt door de uitwisselingen tussen groothandelaren en hun kopers. Kwaliteit is continue onderhevig aan onderhandeldingen via sociale interacties. De capaciteiten van de kopers om met complexe criteria van kwaliteit om te gaan genereert een economie van verscheidenheid die geleid wordt door economische en niet economische elementen. Delen van deze elementen zijn te vinden in de bredere context (maatschappelijke interventies, seizoensgebondenheid, economische crises, etc.) waar deze sociale interacties plaatsvinden.

In de BACWM, kwalificeren en herkwalificeren sociale actoren het verse fruit en de groenten aan de hand van hun individuele kennis, ervaringen en zakelijke kennissen. Deze interacties genereren heterogene assemblages waar 'moderne' en ' exacte' voedseldistributie procedures (grote producenten en supermarkten) naast elkaar bestaan met een verscheidenheid aan 'andere' distributie kanalen (groenteboeren, groothandel distributeurs, voedsel diensten). Met andere woorden, door te analyseren hoe kwaliteit vorm krijgt in de BACWM, toont dit onderzoek homogene en heterogene plekken die naast elkaar bestaan.

Ten slotte belicht hoofdstuk 8 de hoofdconclusie en discussie van het boek. Door aandacht te besteden aan de praktijken van de sociale actoren, is het mogelijk om in te zien dat de veerkracht van de BACWM op de complexe en heterogene interacties, die zich tussen verschillende actoren hebben ontwikkeld, gebaseerd is. Door deze complexe en verschuivende assemblage heeft de BACWM kunnen standhouden en verschillende crisissen in de loop van de jaren kunnen doorstaan.

Samenvattend, door in te spelen op sociale praktijken binnen commerciële locaties zoals de BACWM, moedigt dit proefschrift academici en beleidsmakers aan om hun kennis over complexe en diverse manieren waarop verse producten worden gedistribueerd in de Buenos Aires Metropool, te vergroten.

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

María Laura Viteri was born in La Plata, Buenos Aires, Argentina. She received her B. Sc. degree as an agronomist in 1990. The same year she won a post-graduate scholarship to participate in the X Course of Economy in the Agri-Food System in Viterbo (Italy). Then, from 1992 to 1994 she worked at the Institute of Rural Economy and Sociology (IESR) of the National Institute of Agricultural Technology (INTA).

In 1994 she started her MSc training at the Development, Agriculture and Society Course (CPDA) of Río de Janeiro Federal University, Brazil, and finished it in 1998. Since 1997, she has been working with economists, agronomists and sociologists in different research studies related to food and rural development issues at Rural Economy and Sociology Area of INTA-Balcarce (Buenos Aires).

Her research experience started in the field of non-traditional products like fresh fruit and vegetables. However, she has also collaborated in other projects related to other agro-food processing sectors (mills, frozen food, sausages and cold cuts) by studying their productivity and technological and commercial transformations during the 1990s. She has also participated in research projects of urban and rural development such as the Self-production Program of Foods, INTA/ School of Agriculture of the National University of Mar del Plata (UNMdP) from 2002 to 2006. She has taught in different post-graduate schools at several Argentinean Universities.

In 2006, INTA granted her a scholarship for a PhD. She chose the Wageningen University, where besides this thesis, her work resulted in publications in scientific journals and books and in contributions at international conferences. Finally, she was also a teacher´s assistant in a course of methodology at Wageningen University in 2008.

Currently, she is working at INTA Balcarce doing research on fresh fruit and vegetables in aspects related to quality, logistics, and technical and organizational innovation. Her studies focus on the role of the social in the food chain.

## Completed Training and Supervision Plan María Laura Viteri

| Description | Department/Institute | Month - Year | Credits |
|---|---|---|---|
| **I. General** | | | |
| - CERES Orientation Program | CERES, Utrecht | April-May 2006 | 5 |
| - CERES presentation tutorials | Hoorneboeg, Hilversum | May-June 2006 | 5 |
| **II. Research Methods and Techniques and Domain Specific Theories** | | | |
| - CERES Summer School 2006: 'Technocracy and Development' | Wageningen University | June 2006 | 1 |
| - WUR Course: ENP-31806 Globalization and Sustainability of Food Production and Consumption | ENP, WUR | January 2006 | 6 |
| - WUR Course: RDS-32306 Anthropology and Rural Development | RDS, WUR | May 2006 | 6 |
| - Advanced Research Seminars | RDS, WUR | 2006-2010 | 4 |
| **III. Academic Skills** | | | |
| - Convener of INTA Seminar: Actor Oriented Approach | INTA, Argentina | March 2007 | 1 |
| - Teaching: Methods, Techniques and Data Analysis of Field Research | RDS, WUR | May 2009 | 2 |
| - Convener of Annemarie Mol's Seminar: How to contribute? On exploring complexities and adding value | CERES, WUR | May 2009 | 1 |
| **IV. Presentations of Research Results** | | | |
| - Efectos de la globalización en el sector alimentario argentino | ICA, Sevilla University, Spain | July 2006 | 2 |
| - Mercado Mayorista de frutas y hortalizas de Buenos Aires: Propuesta de análisis | AAEA, Córdoba, Argentina | October 2006 | 2 |
| - Mercado Central de Buenos Aires. Desafíos institucionales en la era de la globalización | ALASRU, FLACSO, Quito, Ecuador | November 2006 | 2 |
| - Life worlds and the social life of commodities: the fresh fruits and vegetables wholesale market in Buenos Aires (Argentina) | CERES Summer School | June 2007 | 3,5 |
| - A little country: Buenos Aires Wholesale Market | ESRS, RC40, Wageningen | August 2007 | 2 |
| - La ruta del tomate platense | FES, Barcelona, Spain | September 2007 | 2 |
| - Constructing social life: Facilities and social actors at the Buenos Aires Central Wholesale Market (BACWM). | ISS, Den Haag | January 2009 | 2 |
| - Quality: Different meanings and negotiations around fresh fruits and vegetables | Sofia University, Bulgaria | September 2009 | 2 |
| **Total** | | | **48.5** |

COVER: Alicia Raquel Pereira based on *Un Mundo* by Angeles Santos Torroella