



## CONSUMING CLASS: Multilevel Marketers in Neoliberal Mexico

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Responding to financial crises in the 1980s, the Mexican government adopted a neoliberal economic model designed to reduce public spending and to encourage foreign investment (Skidmore and Smith 2001:248). The shift away from state-owned companies and protectionist trade barriers accelerated into the 1990s with the passage of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA). Even though these structural changes failed to prevent future economic instability, all subsequent Mexican presidents have pursued the same policies of privatization and free trade. International lending organizations and the United States have championed these measures in Mexico, the rest of Latin America, and literally the entire world, but many of the citizens affected by these shifts have not. Recent studies examining the consensus that has developed around neoliberalism reveal that its ascent has rarely been democratic (Duménil and Lévy 2004; Harvey 2005; Klein 2007). Wherever leaders have imposed unregulated capitalism, they have done so by ignoring, co-opting, or violently repressing dissent. Anthropologists heeding the call to study neoliberalism critically (Hoffman et al. 2006:9) have done so mostly by focusing on zones of resistance. In this article, I consider why some neoliberal subjects welcome the radical reshaping of their relationship with the state.

A little noticed effect of Mexico's neoliberal turn at the end of the 1980s was the arrival of multilevel marketing (Xardel 1993:107). These companies, represented at first by Amway and Herbalife and soon blossoming into dozens of homegrown imitators, sell products wholesale to registered distributors, who offer them at retail prices through face-to-face transactions. Avon, a pioneer of direct selling,

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had operated in Mexico since the 1950s, but it compensates its representatives on a single level, that is with the profit on marking up product prices (Ramírez Tamayo 1995). The companies lured by Mexico's new business-friendly climate reward distributors not only for products sold but also for new sellers enrolled. Under this dual commission system, top representatives report million-dollar annual incomes and inspire others to join with tales of European vacations and expensive cars. In 1996, several leading companies formed the Mexican Association of Direct Selling (AMVD in its Spanish acronym) with 60 members, 88 percent of whom used a multilevel structure (Gutiérrez Zúñiga 2005:32).

According to business analysts, multilevel marketing companies' fortunes run counter to economic cycles, expanding in places where the economy contracts (Roha 1991). Becoming a direct seller requires no previous experience, no formal education, and little startup capital, so it is particularly attractive when other forms of employment are scarce. Moreover, companies like Amway emphasize their anticorporate style by empowering workers to be their own bosses and set their own hours. But unfavorable economic conditions are not enough to explain the growing popularity of multilevel marketing in developing countries like Mexico (Biggart 1989:172). As Ara Wilson (1999:402) discovered in Thailand after the economic crisis of 1997, multilevel marketing attracted new recruits because its rhetoric of entrepreneurship and decentralization resonated strongly with the logic of the neoliberal solutions the country pursued. That millions of Mexicans, like their Thai counterparts, seek to realign their work lives along neoliberal lines rather than resist the dismantling of social welfare protections suggests that neoliberalism's imposition may not require coercion.

Esperanza is one of the three million distributors of Omnilife nutritional supplements in Mexico. Between 2003 and 2006, I conducted fieldwork with over 50 current and former members of the Omnilife sales force in the central-western state of Michoacán. Although the company likes to showcase the top earners in its promotions, the vast majority of distributors resemble Esperanza, who rarely receives any commission checks for her work. As I followed her through different phases of her career with Omnilife, I observed how completely Esperanza had internalized the tenets of neoliberalism: the free market rewards every entrepreneur without limit and individuals should help themselves rather than look to government handouts. Even as her efforts to cash in on capitalism's promise faltered, she refused to fault the system. Rather, she blamed herself and vowed to redouble her efforts to promote Omnilife and its products.

Her commitment to Omnilife is consistent with the tenets of neoliberalism, which holds that if unencumbered by government interference, individual participants in the market will determine the most efficient arrangement of resources. In practice, however, this laissez-faire approach has only widened levels of inequality because capital accumulation favors elites who already have access to markets. The uneven effects of neoliberalism have become visible in agricultural states like Kansas, where free trade has enriched giant corporate food processors while pushing small farmers into bankruptcy. Yet, the producers most adversely affected by free market policies are the ones most likely to support the politicians who promote the ruinous reforms (Frank 2004:76). Esperanza's case presents a similar paradox; she has embraced an economic model in which she is poorly positioned to compete. If, as Thomas Frank argues, heartland politicians secure the votes of those they harm by erecting a smokescreen of cultural issues, Omnilife sells Esperanza on neoliberalism by offering nebulous promises of access to consumption.

Consumption, as Jean and John Comaroff point out, is "the invisible hand, or the Gucci-gloved fist, that animates the political impulses, the material imperatives, and the social forms . . . of capitalism in its neoliberal, global manifestation" (Comaroff and Comaroff 2000:294). For the struggling middle classes in Latin America, maintaining the accustomed level of consumption has become the last relic of their tenuous hold on respectability. Esperanza used to be a comfortable member of the Mexican bourgeoisie, but when her husband fell ill, there was no support system to buffer her fall. In Omnilife's prominent display of luxury goods, she sees her opportunity to recover the material affluence she and her family used to enjoy. Multilevel marketing, consistent with its roots in neoliberal capitalism, celebrates consumption and effaces production. Omnilife and its competitors leave vague the process of designing and manufacturing the supplements and instead emphasize consuming them consistently. Even the work of multilevel marketing downplays physical labor by reducing the business plan to an outgrowth of consumption: take the drinks and recommend them to others. By consuming the beverages diligently, distributors believe they will generate profits to enable them to purchase the trappings of middle class status. That the distributors rarely earn the money necessary to support their consumption goals does not always deter them. Many choose to leave the business, but they are replaced by others who seek a self-help solution to their financial problems. Like neoliberalism itself, multilevel marketing wins adherents by persuasion, not coercion.

### FIRST ENCOUNTER: SELLING MIRACLES

An unusual invitation arrived one day in 2000 when I was living in Tzintzuntzan, a small community in the heartland Mexican state of Michoacán. A white piece of paper slipped under the door read, "We invite you to drink coffee. We will talk about how to improve your health." Next to an icon of a steaming cup of coffee appeared a list of illnesses that the meeting would address: diabetes, skin problems, gastritis, colitis, rheumatism, anemia, fatigue, headaches, anxiety, and learning problems. I did not know the hosts well, but I was curious what kind of beverage cured so many problems. When I appeared that Saturday afternoon, the couple greeted me by offering a cup of coffee and a plate of a cooked vegetable called *chayote*. They had arranged a display on a side table consisting of a dozen white boxes and bottles with purple labels. Joining us on the covered porch were the couple's teenaged daughter, a young girl, five adult women, and a voluble, gray-haired woman named Esperanza.

Esperanza introduced herself as a representative of a nutritional supplement firm called Omnilife. She asked each of us our names. When it was my turn, Esperanza declared dramatically that I resembled her brother. "My brother went to Chicago to work and had an accident on the job. He came back to Mexico to recover, but he died five months later. I wish I had the products then to save him." This remark and newfound intimacy with the speaker convinced me and the other guests to listen intently. Esperanza continued, interspersing our names into her practiced spiel. She described how the company mixed ancient herbal remedies with the most advanced technologies to create a line of about eighty vitamin-fortified powders. Holding a company magazine, Esperanza flipped through pictures of smiling representatives who healed themselves through copious consumption of Omnilife drinks. "We'll be honest with you. God is the only one who cures you, we just help." Esperanza made the sign of the cross, brushing the crucifix chain around her neck.

Omnilife, the most prominent Mexican-based multilevel marketer, manufactures a range of nutritional supplements designed to stimulate weight loss, raise immunity, and strengthen bones. Turning to the display of bottles on the table, Esperanza described the benefits of several of the products. The hostess, taking notes, asked a few clarifying questions about the proper dosage of each item, but no one else spoke. Reaching the final product on the table, Power Maker, Esperanza shared her own testimony. "This is a mix of grapefruit and seafood. It will be used to nourish Olympic athletes. It relieves fatigue and, for men, multiplies the quality and quantity of sperm," she said with a grin.

My husband suffered an automobile accident we thought was going to be fatal. A rib pierced his liver. He had a total body infection and went into a coma. Six doctors told me I'd be a widow. But God hadn't said so. I gave him Power Maker and took it myself. He got better. I lost weight, it cured my menopausal pains, and I realized my arthritis was gone.

To illustrate the miraculous qualities of Power Maker, Esperanza offered a coda to her testimonial: "One day while I was playing basketball with my grandchildren, I felt a somersault in my stomach. It turns out I was five months pregnant—after menopause! The little girl you see here is mine." Esperanza's faith in the products required no scientific confirmation, just personal experience. For her, consuming the powders dissolved in liquid could almost literally raise the dead and cause a type of immaculate conception.

Endowing consumable items with sacred qualities, I would later learn, was a fixture of multilevel marketing. By interpreting Omnilife's vitamins through a Christian lens, Esperanza lifted the products out of the realm of crass materialism. She offered the powders to us not as an instrumentalist ploy to enrich herself, but rather as a tool enabling us to achieve the same improvement that she had. In this way, the work of itinerant selling lost its association with dishonest flimflam artists and took on the mantle of religious respectability. All successful Omnilife distributors borrowed the before-and-after language common to Protestant testimonials of rebirth (Cahn 2006:136). Their experiences confirmed that proper consumption could yield similar transformations for anyone who drank the vitamin beverages. Esperanza's faith in the products exemplified what David Chidester, referencing Tupperware, another prominent multilevel marketer, calls "plastic religion" (2005:61). Like the flexibility of plastic, Omnilife's vitamins glorified the possibility of changing oneself to fit the ideal of a new kind of person.

After an hour and a half, the group disbanded. Most of the adult women bought a box of the coffee-flavored weight-loss drink, but I demurred. Although the coffee I sampled tasted pleasantly sweet, it did not produce sufficient health miracles to justify my spending \$30 for a box of 20 servings. Undaunted, Esperanza told me that I could enroll in Omnilife to purchase products anywhere in Mexico or the United States at a discount. Our hosts in Tzintzuntzan had enrolled recently. The wife remarked that she had been a direct seller of Jafra cosmetics for ten years, but she tired of having to deliver orders on credit, then make repeated visits to coax payments from clients. By contrast, orders for Omnilife must be paid in full before delivery, guaranteeing that she never goes into debt herself. Her

husband reported an easing of his back pain after taking Omnilife's Power Maker supplement. He estimated that they spent \$100 a month on Omnilife products, not including travel expenses to the wholesale store in Morelia, the state capital. Although they had yet to realize any profits from multilevel marketing, they shared Esperanza's confidence that they would earn supplemental income while saving money on medicines.

That few distributors ever achieve the promised prosperity does little to discourage new recruits from dreaming. When the unlikelihood of great wealth becomes apparent, many enrolled members quit the company or switch to another one. Annual turnover rates in the industry commonly top 100 percent, indicating that even the replacements for dropouts leave the company (Wotruba et al. 2005:92). The high attrition rates do not mean that all the distributors who remain achieve profitability. One survey of active Amway distributors in the United States found no relationship between commitment to the organization and overall financial success (Johnston 1987:136). Most distributors resemble Esperanza. Despite their identification with the company and adherence to its suggestions, they have yet to build networks that will allow them to stay at home and receive passive income. Still, they continue to radiate self-confidence to others while investing more time in recruiting people and more resources in consuming products.

### SECOND ENCOUNTER: REVEALING A CRACK IN THE FACADE

Three years after I first met Esperanza over coffee and *chayote* in Tzintzuntzan, I encountered her fortuitously in the state capital Morelia. Walking near the Omnilife wholesale center, I noticed a corner store painted in vivid purple and yellow, the distinctive colors of the Omnilife logo. From the street, though, it appeared to be a taco stand catering to the lunchtime crowd of professionals. I stepped in, planning to ask if the owners had any connection to Omnilife, when I saw Esperanza in an apron behind the griddle. She greeted me effusively and offered me a plate of tacos. Few customers came by, so she joined me at a table to catch up on each other's activities. She told me again how I reminded her of her brother and reiterated how she wishes she had known about the Omnilife supplements when he was alive. In January 2003, she opened this support center for members of her organization, sharing space with a daughter's eatery. In the evenings, the tables turned into display cases for Omnilife products and the chairs became seats for participants in training sessions.

She proudly pointed to a map attached to a bulletin board on a wall of the room. It showed the route of the Black Sea cruise that she and 800 other Omnilife

distributors had enjoyed several years before. The company rewarded her and her husband with the all-expenses paid trip for consistently reaching sales targets. The highlights of the vacation for her, she told me, were visiting Jerusalem and meeting so many devoted distributors. Such benefits kept her motivated to do the hard work of sharing the supplements and seeking recruits. She opened her agenda book to show me pages filled with scribbled notes about clients. She boasted that she had traveled to remote villages simply to sell two packets of supplements because her clients' improvement meant more to her than a profit. "I'm in love with Omnilife," she gushed.

She shared with me the story of how that love began. In 1992, her adult daughter suffered a severe case of chicken pox. When a doctor came to treat her, the medicine sent her daughter into shock. Desperate for a quick remedy, the doctor wanted to administer a mixture of two Omnilife products, Super Mix and Dual-C. Esperanza was skeptical. Omnilife was only a year old then, and she had never heard of the company. The concoction smelled foul, "ground dog would have smelled better," she quipped. Yet, she gave permission to administer it, and within four minutes her daughter had regained normal levels of blood pressure and sugar.

Fully recovered, her daughter paid the \$20 fee to enroll and also signed up her mother as the first member of her downline. As the wife of a prosperous small business owner, Esperanza didn't feel it necessary to sell the products or recruit others. She remembers that she placed her children in private schools and used to send her driver to do errands for her. When her husband suffered his near-fatal accident, however, he was out of work for over three years, and the family went bankrupt. She turned to the products both to heal him and to replace the missing income. Though her husband regained mobility, he never returned to working, so Esperanza's pastime became a full-time commitment. Over a decade of recommending the products, she has built a network of 66 distributors around the state. Though she lived in Morelia, she spent several days a week visiting smaller communities throughout the state giving orientation sessions to the company and its products.

As the conversation continued, however, Esperanza revealed a chink in her exuberant demeanor. At first she dedicated her time to selling Omnilife's products for an immediate profit. Her dedication won her the use of a Volkswagen Beetle (on which she painted the Power Maker logo) and access to credit from Omnilife to purchase a home, but also required her to put in long hours holding house meetings like the one where we first met. Next, she focused on recruiting distributors to her



downline, but it turned out even more arduous to motivate the members of her network to maintain high purchase levels. Commissions from her network totaled only about \$150–\$200 a month.

Sensing her frustration, I suggested, repeating what I had read in company literature, that attending guest lectures with visiting distributors and semiannual corporate rallies could be inspiring. Esperanza dismissed the idea: “We’ve already been to many events.” I mentioned that some distributors have expanded their business by visiting other parts of the state. “Where haven’t I gone?” she countered. The only additional wisdom I could think to offer her was, “Take more product.” She responded that she drank five water bottles full of the dissolved powders each day. When I returned to Morelia a year later, in 2004, I found that her support center had become a bakery, and the landlord told me that Esperanza had left no contact information. I suspected that she had added to the company’s high turnover rate.

### THIRD ENCOUNTER: CONFRONTING CRISIS

I returned to Morelia for seven months of fieldwork in 2005. Local Omnilife leaders hosted a guest speaker once a month in a rented hotel ballroom. The speakers tended to be high-level distributors from across Mexico, known as “diamonds,” who explained their strategies for success using PowerPoint presentations. Typically, the events drew an audience of a couple hundred, both first-timers interested in learning more about the company and veterans eager for tips on how to grow their business. A guest speaker had been scheduled for the first weeks of my stay in Morelia, so I paid the \$3 to attend. When I reached the hotel lobby, I saw a crowd of people waiting expectantly for their guests, tickets in hand. One of them was Esperanza. She welcomed me with a hug and told me that she has invited several potential recruits to the talk. She encouraged me to go inside so as not to miss the speaker, but promised to see me after the event.

In the crush of people exiting the three-hour talk, she and I failed to connect, but I had her business card this time, so I called her a few days later to set up a meeting. She invited me to her house that evening, giving me directions on public transportation. She apologized that she could not drive me because she no longer had the Beetle. Her row house was in a residential neighborhood abutting the mountain that marked the southern periphery of the city. Originally all the homes shared an identical yellow facade, but some owners had added a carport or repainted. Esperanza’s home had not benefited from such remodeling. She ushered me up a narrow staircase to a landing where she displayed family



photos alongside a portrait of Pope John Paul II. This led to a cramped living room/dining room. A large wooden table filled the center of the room, leaving only a slender space to reach the bookcases pushed against the wall. The compact kitchen adjoined the main room, illuminated by a single window crisscrossed by metal bars. Esperanza finished the tour by showing me one of the two bedrooms (her husband was asleep in the other) and the bathroom in the back of the flat.

Esperanza offered me a glass of water to which she added a measure of Omnilife's Thermogen Tea, and then served herself. She tore off squares from a roll of paper towels, jokingly calling them "Czech napkins." This play on words relied on the similarity between "Czech" and *chueco*, the Spanish word for "crooked." It also reflected her good-natured way of dealing with privation. After 13 years, Esperanza's devotion to multilevel marketing had not rewarded her with material success. She referred to the presentation by the visiting distributor earlier in the week. "You saw the same slides I did. If I follow all those rules to the letter, why am I not a diamond? My check has gone down 60 percent." I ventured that perhaps the design of the compensation plan limited the number of distributors who could generate large incomes. Esperanza brushed aside this idea. "The system works elsewhere. Why aren't the checks falling in Guadalajara, Veracruz, and Mexico City?" She then answered her own question: "Your sponsor is the example. Distributors in Morelia don't feel comfortable in the support centers. The centers are arid. The system is very good. It's charisma that matters." When her own support center folded, she calculated that she lost about \$8,000 "down the toilet." She set a bad example for her network by spending the money she earned from retail sales of the product instead of reinvesting it in the business. "I ate the goose that lays the golden eggs," Esperanza mused.

After closing the support center, Esperanza redirected her energies to retail sales. She would load a sampling from Omnilife's line of premixed beverages and colas into a cooler, douse them with ice, and then wheel them on a cart through the municipal marketplace. Manual labor like this helped her win the cruise to Europe when she first enrolled in the company, but it required physical strength. One day in 2004, while lowering her cart of products from a city bus, Esperanza slipped and fell. As she recounted the accident, she stood up from the table to lift her pant leg, exposing her still-swollen knee. "I have trouble walking. I can't carry heavy things. My life changed." Once more she turned to show me her daily planner. Scribbled appointments filled the weeks preceding her accident, but pages of blank lines followed it.

Without the income from reselling, Esperanza faced economic crisis. Her commission check from Omnilife dwindled to about \$10 every two weeks once the company deducted payment for her home loan. Her savings account held barely \$20, not enough to pay the utilities. "I've hit bottom. Do you want to see?" She stood up, walked to the refrigerator, and opened the door. I saw three eggs and a wedge of cheese amidst the empty shelves.

My participation in Omnilife's relentlessly optimistic training sessions did not provide me with a ready response. I asked, haltingly, "What will you do now?" Esperanza regained her confidence: "This is the moment to begin as if we've just signed up for the first time. There are no other options. I hit bottom, but only by hitting bottom can you rise again. It's like a diving pool. You have to hit the bottom to push back up. We'll take off again with Omnilife by opening another support center." I wondered how this support center would be different from the earlier failed one. She seemed to have thought about this already: "This time we'll work by multiplying people. With my injured leg, I can't work as before, but it doesn't matter. If the conditions are cold, I'll heat them." Pressing gently, I asked at what point she would conclude that Omnilife did not work for her and move on. Pointing to the bottle of Thermogen Tea, she answered, "*This* doesn't fail. *We* do." In spite of the mounting evidence that Omnilife's business plan did not generate sufficient income, Esperanza refused to blame the free market system.

She had already identified a potential site for her new support center near the wholesale store. To make the \$340-a-month rent feasible, she intended to share the space with eight other distributors. They would all contribute to the publicity, but take turns holding meetings with their networks of distributors. The plan had the additional benefit that Esperanza's youngest daughter, the Omnilife miracle child, would be entering secondary school near the proposed location. She, her husband, and her daughter would make the support center their home, further cutting expenses. So far, five distributors have expressed interest. Esperanza planned to visit a notary to draw up a contract for the business partners to sign while she looked for three more people to join. When I finished my glass of tea, Esperanza encouraged me to sign on as a coleader of the support center. I explained that I did not have any distributors in my network to train nor would I be in Morelia for very long, but these rationalizations did not make her rescind the offer. We left my participation vague as we said goodbye.

## FOCUSING ON RESISTANCE

My inability to coax Esperanza to temper her commitment to Omnilife or at least to acknowledge flaws in the company's structure frustrated me. As part of my research, I enrolled as an Omnilife distributor to gain access to training sessions and promotional materials, but I never sold products or recruited others to join my network. Nor did I ever abandon my skepticism about the company's claims to foster financial and physical health. The powders contained little more than artificial sweetener and some vitamins, nothing potent enough to treat serious illness or to compensate for the lack of universal health care. Similarly, the promise of financial independence seemed a poor substitute for salaried work with guaranteed protections. Omnilife distributors bragged that they could set their own hours, but they were reluctant to admit that they earned money only when the parent company did. Because the majority of distributors were women like Esperanza, who combined the arduous work of selling with ongoing household duties, Omnilife's rhetoric of freedom seemed particularly disingenuous.

Indeed, all over Latin America, the unfulfilled freedom promised by neoliberalism has sparked angry protest. Indigenous populations have been particularly vocal in their resistance to the adoption of free market capitalism. Suzana Sawyer (2004) eloquently chronicles the ongoing battle of indigenous organizations to challenge the Ecuadorian government's embrace of neoliberal policies. Their protests against the privatization of resources erupted into violent uprisings several times during the 1990s. More than a contest over material resources, these struggles represented an attempt by indigenous peoples to rewrite the national narrative to favor pluralism over transnational corporate capital. In this way, Sawyer argues, neoliberalism contains the seeds of its own destruction: "Globalizing forces have exacerbated political, economic, and social inequalities while simultaneously provoking the proliferation of oppositional identities and counter-dreams" (2004:16). Far from a foregone conclusion, neoliberalism is an uncertain project under threat from indigenous alternatives to the elites' vision of society.

Anthropologists have documented similar movements across Latin America that seek to contest the inevitability of neoliberalism. Contributors to a collection of essays about the impact of structural adjustment policies on Latin America stress that Latin Americans "display a remarkable resiliency and creativity in their engagements with neoliberalism" (Phillips 1998:xii). It is too simplistic, they argue, to see marginalized Latin Americans as powerless victims of a hegemonic effort to advance the interests of the privileged few. Duncan Green's overview of the spread of neoliberalism across the continent includes a three-page chart listing

the long history of protests that have arisen whenever Latin American countries have imposed austerity measures (Green 1995:167–169). The signing of NAFTA, that cornerstone of neoliberal philosophy, was one of the catalysts for the violent outburst of the Zapatistas in southern Mexico (Nash 1994). Postero (2005), following Yashar (1998), interprets the popular uprising in Bolivia in 2003 as addressing not just material needs but also the role of civil society in determining whether the country follows neoliberal reforms.

Reports of courageous resistance to efforts by elites to weaken social welfare programs and to privatize collective resources illustrate how foreign the tenets of neoliberalism seem to many Latin Americans. At the same time, many upwardly mobile citizens find the tinge of the foreign attractive. They associate their own governments with corruption and failed economic recovery and believe that tighter integration with a globalized free market will lift them to greater affluence. When leftist candidate Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva ran for president of Brazil in 1994 on a platform of maintaining state monopolies, he lost to Fernando Henrique Cardoso, who advocated a neoliberal economic plan. In her perceptive study of the Brazilian middle class, Maureen O'Dougherty discovered that for many voters, "Brazil's problem was not capitalism, but bad government, national business, and consumers." They favored the free market because, as an international entity, it was free from interference by corrupt local politicians (O'Dougherty 2002:202).

Even as economic crisis in the 1990s forced members of the Brazilian middle class to trade salaried white-collar jobs for commission-based sales positions, they fought to retain the markers of class identity. They defined their status through consumption, particularly of items with a foreign provenance like trips to Disney World (O'Dougherty 2002:11). As the rate of inflation topped 2,000 percent, the only resistance the Brazilian middle class mounted in the 1990s was to their precipitous fall in the status hierarchy. They invested their hopes in neoliberal reforms as a way to restore their consumption habits. Like Barbara Ehrenreich found in her study *Fear of Falling* (1989), the middle class uses consumption to enforce its separate status from the lower classes, but lives in constant anxiety of losing the control necessary to maintain the customary standard of living. "In this class," Ehrenreich concludes, "no one escapes the requirements of self-discipline and self-directed labor" (1989:15). Esperanza, hedging against the loss of her position as a business owner's wife, felt this demand acutely.

Defining membership in Mexico's middle class depends more on perception than on economic status. Even someone as financially precarious as Esperanza can count herself part of the middle class when she contrasts her family to the

wealthy elite, on the one hand, and the marginalized poor, on the other hand. Though “folk taxonomies” of class vary, Mexicans on both sides of the divide vigilantly patrol the boundary between the middle and lower classes (Levenson 2001:42–43). The separation between proletariat and professionals becomes most clear in their work. Lower classes perform manual labor while middle classes engage in mental labor (Gutmann 2002:119). Despite the physical demands of hauling Omnilife products through the market, Esperanza considers her work a service, allowing her clients to call her “Doctor” and tending them like patients. Maintaining her hold on that subtle distinction takes increasingly large reserves of self-convincing. Austerity measures implemented by the Mexican government since the debt crisis of the 1980s undid the investment in social programs that once made economic mobility possible after WWII (Rothstein 2007:34; Williamson 2006:59). Multilevel marketing offers frustrated rural and urban Mexicans the chance to ascend a new hierarchy unfettered by the zero-sum calculus of market reforms (Frye 1996:33).

By examining the experience of the middle class in the face of economic crisis, a different picture of neoliberalism emerges. Unlike the determined protest led by the popular classes, the Brazilian families who cling to trips to Disney World as a rite of passage for their children and Omnilife distributors like Esperanza who struggle to meet their mortgage payments view the ascendancy of the market as an opportunity. They are the heirs of what historian Lizabeth Cohen (2003) calls the “Consumers’ Republic,” a marriage between mass consumption and national prosperity forged in the United States after WWII and exported to the rest of the globe. Michael Storper’s overview of late-twentieth-century economic trends attributes the processes of globalization to the rise of a consumer identity among middle-classes around the world. Many literally become “hooked” on consuming and suffer when their purchasing power diminishes (Storper 2000:392). Rather than a rational assessment of available resources, “the need to spend whatever it takes to keep current within a chosen reference group” drives consumption decisions for this status-conscious class (Schor 1998:6).

Esperanza and other Omnilife distributors were less interested in disrupting the national consensus on free markets than they were in ensuring continued access to the goods and services that marked their membership among the middle class. Images of attaining a middle-class lifestyle through consumption first beguiled Mexicans as early as the 1940s with the arrival of U.S.-based department stores and advertising agencies (Moreno 2003:12). Esperanza’s house in Morelia was just a short walk from a shopping center with a Sears and a Wal-Mart-owned

grocery store. Scholars of shopping have shown how the ubiquity of affordable goods at retailers like Wal-Mart holds out the promise of middle-class status for all (Zukin 2004:85). Even low-income girls in urban Mexico aim to emulate the lavish quinceañera parties they see in newspapers' society pages and television soap operas (Napolitano 2002:132). The growth in the number of Mexicans who align their interests and consumption habits with the middle class has enabled Wal-Mart to become both the largest retailer and private employer in Mexico (Lyons 2007).

The same demographic has also attracted the sights of multilevel marketing companies. An industry executive pointed to Mexico's rapidly growing middle class as a reason the country ranks fourth in the world in direct sellers (Bartlett 1994:217). An Amway official is even more enthusiastic about Mexico's potential market for his company: "A growing middle class with increased spending power in this huge market of 80 million consumers helps explain why Amway is so gung ho on Mexico and has seen steady growth there since 1990" (Robinson 1997:115). Despite its all-inclusive rhetoric, multilevel marketers depend on an inexhaustible supply of underemployed members of the middle class who seek to recover from economic downturns through supplemental work (Jordan 2003). As C. Wright Mills presciently noted in his early study of middle-class workers in the United States, "the salesman's world has now become everyone's world, and, in some part, everybody has become a salesman" (Mills 1956:161). Without the assurance of a salaried job, members of the middle class become free agents who sell on commission, fueling others' needs for consumption to satisfy their own.

Omnilife aggressively targets those Mexicans with a tenuous grasp on the middle class and nurtures their aspirations for consumption. Rather than blaming the erosion of state support for the precarious financial health of many Mexicans, company founder Jorge Vergara asserts that replacing protectionism with the free market is precisely the solution for achieving greater wealth. "Paternalism is an illness that has infected Mexico for many years," he wrote in an issue of *Time* magazine. "Government subsidies and the expectation that the government must solve our problems do us a disservice by discouraging inventiveness" (Vergara 2001). Vergara enshrined his theory in Omnilife's motto: People helping people. To restore her lifestyle, Esperanza does not need to seek a government handout, which would be incongruent with her middle-class self-image. Instead, she can unleash her entrepreneurial spirit by taking advantage of market forces to sell Omnilife's vitamin supplements and to build her own business. This path, assiduously followed, leads to unlimited gain and a return to her previous comfortable lifestyle.

Should she fail to see the desired results, she cannot blame the free enterprise system or the company products because they clearly worked to raise Vergara's standard of living. As he emphasizes in interviews (Friedland 1999; Mora Tavares 2003; Zarembo 2001), Vergara faced a drop from the middle class himself after being downsized from his real estate job in the 1980s. He started several businesses that failed before joining Herbalife, the multilevel marketer of weight loss products, when it first expanded to Mexico. After learning the system, he broke away to start his own vitamin company in 1991 with six distributors and a \$10,000 loan. From those inauspicious origins, Vergara built an empire of consumption. He bought a Boeing 737, the first of its kind in private hands in Latin America (Delaunay 2002). Profits from Omnilife financed a spending spree that encompassed professional soccer teams in Mexico, Costa Rica, and the United States (Zeigler 2003), film production (Malkin 2003), and modern architecture (Ourossoff 2001).

Although Esperanza has not had close contact with Jorge Vergara, she has observed firsthand the affluence his first cousin, Pepe Vergara. As one of the original six Omnilife distributors, Pepe traded a job as an insurance salesman to begin peddling vitamin supplements. Eventually, he constructed the largest and most profitable network in the company, reaping commissions of over \$1 million a year. He was at the head of Esperanza's lineage in Omnilife and has visited Morelia several times to motivate the members of his organization. She recalled that on his first trip, he arrived from Guadalajara by public bus. The next time, he drove his own Mercedes-Benz. On his most recent visit, he flew in his private plane. Once she and her husband attended a dinner party for 120 Omnilife guests at Pepe's elegant Puerto Vallarta beach house complete with infinity pool. She remembered that she was full even before the meal was served. She held her hands apart several inches to indicate the size of the shrimp appetizers. She did not begrudge Pepe his extravagances, though. Amidst such opulence, he remained "humble," unfussy, and willing to talk to anyone about the business. This was the dream that motivated Esperanza to redouble her dedication to Omnilife and insulated the company from criticism. She counted on the capitalist markets to perform the same magic for her and return her family to its previous patterns of consumption.

#### FINAL ENCOUNTER: REMAINING LOYAL

In the months that followed, I never received further information from Esperanza about the support center. The week between Christmas and New Year's 2005, shortly before I left Morelia, I arranged to visit Esperanza. She invited me to join her for breakfast and to accompany her on a day of selling Omnilife product.



Her knee was healing gradually, allowing her more mobility and more opportunity to reach potential customers. She had resumed visits to the large municipal market six days a week, selling supplements to the vendors at their stalls. She respected Sunday for religious reasons, but when the financial need was great enough, she worked all seven days. On a good day, she moved nearly \$100 worth of product in six hours, pocketing a 40 percent profit. Other days, she netted just \$15.

Esperanza wanted to take a bus to the market, but remembering her earlier mishap, I volunteered to pay for the taxi. In the car, I asked what happened with her plan to open a new support center. The business plan, she answered blithely, called for a consortium of nine distributors, but she could secure firm commitments from only two other people. "The people of Morelia want things for free," she said by way of explanation. So she abandoned the idea, but spared Omnilife any blame.

In any case, she had settled into a rhythm at the marketplace since returning to regular retail sales in July 2005. In addition to the steady income, Esperanza had enrolled four new distributors from the market into her network. On the downside, the distributor she had enlisted to sell in the market during her recovery from the fall continued to work the same route and had secured the loyalty of many customers. Although a portion of her recruit's sales will return to Esperanza in the form of a commission check, she still complained that the woman had "pirated" her clients.

If her leg bothered her, Esperanza did not show it. The marketplace occupied several city blocks. An aluminum roof covered the cavernous central portion, where the meat, fish, and food stalls were located. A periphery of stalls offering music discs, clothing, pottery, plants, and all manner of plastic goods ringed the main building under protection of tarps (see Figure 1). Esperanza wound effortlessly through the clogged, narrow aisles, leaving me to scurry behind. She greeted everyone with effusive charm, but focused her sales pitch on the merchants who watched over their booths. As aggressive as she could be in pushing her products, Esperanza took seriously the charitable mission emphasized in Omnilife. When one vendor complained of hormonal problems, Esperanza sat next to her and listened carefully before recommending which Omnilife products would serve her best. Esperanza promised that she would return regularly to check on the client's progress. "We will work for you," she reassured her.

This day, Esperanza had relatives staying with her, so she finished her work at the market by 3 p.m. The shortened day yielded her 388 pesos in sales (about \$37) from 26 different clients. Usually she had to pay for her transportation, which involved two bus rides: from her home to the Omnilife store to buy inventory,



**FIGURE 1.** With her knee healed, Esperanza returned to visiting her clients in Morelia's marketplace. One day in 2005 her nephew helped her maneuver the cart of Omnilife products. Photograph by Peter S. Cahn.

then from the store to the market. Other expenses included the supplements she consumed herself ("You have to put gasoline in the car," she remarked) and food she bought in the market. This day a metal piece broke off her battered cart, so she would have to pay to repair it or buy another.

After more than three hours in the labyrinthine market, we emerged into the sun. On the way out of the market, we encountered Esperanza's protégé, who carried a similar cart of Omnilife products. The two women kissed genially and inquired about each other's Christmas celebrations. Esperanza explained that she was leaving early to serve lunch to a visiting relative. The other woman said that she would stay on for another few hours to make the rounds of clients. Several colas still remained in Esperanza's cart. When we crossed the street to wait at the bus stop, she offered one of the cans to me, popping open one for herself. She showed no signs of fatigue or depression after the frequent rejection she faced during the day's rounds of the market. She boasted to me that in the past she had even picked up clients while waiting at the bus stop. As if to prove it, she called to a young woman standing near us, "Would you like an Omnilife drink?" The woman politely shook her head. Undeterred, Esperanza boarded the bus and immediately asked the passengers what they would like to buy.

### CONCLUSION: WELCOMING NEOLIBERALISM

The most vocal and sometimes violent opponents of neoliberalism in Latin America have tended to be the dispossessed and marginal (Harris 2000:151). Legacies of colonialism and corruption have systematically excluded them from sharing the benefits of the natural resources of their countries, and, with neoliberal policies, they saw any prospect for a more equitable distribution of wealth foreclosed. Anthropologists who call attention to the ways indigenous communities and popular classes have protested economic reforms that favor elites help to correct the view that global capitalism is somehow inevitable or adopted by unanimous consensus. Their research highlights the ways that government leaders use coercion to impose a radical free market agenda on dissenting citizens. What the focus on the margins leaves out, however, is the range of responses that Latin Americans have exhibited in the face of economic crisis (Hellman 1999). The rising popularity of multilevel marketing indicates that one strategy has been to embrace neoliberal reforms.

In the last 20 years, the multilevel marketing pitch has found receptive audiences wherever people seek to alter their status. Young women in rural Thailand, inspired by images of consumption through television and magazines, join Amway to associate themselves with a more glamorous world than the one their peasant mothers inhabit (Fadzillah 2005:86). With their commission checks, the women buy blue jeans, makeup, and shoes to reinforce their newfound sophistication. Similarly, as Greece pursues greater integration with the European Union, middle-class urban women draw on their participation in the multilevel marketing of

cosmetics to shift from traditional womanhood to a more modern, entrepreneurial image (Moutsatsos 2001:152). The same process of repositioning occurs among multilevel marketers in China. There, multilevel marketing companies assure workers anxious about free market reforms that “by purchasing a spot in a transnational network, they could unfix the conventional notions of gender, rurality, urbanity, and cosmopolitanism” that limit their upward mobility (Jeffery 2001:28). Like Esperanza and her colleagues in Mexico, multilevel marketers in countries that have adopted neoliberal economic policies accept the reforms willingly and aim to harness them to raise their standard of living.

Although it is obvious why captains of industry would welcome less government regulation in their businesses, it is less clear why middle-class Latin Americans would accept an economic system from which they derive little profit. Without a state-sponsored safety net, they have few options for maintaining their usual lifestyle in the face of declining wages and corporate downsizing. One option would be to economize and forgo luxuries, but members of the middle class have come to cling to consumption habits as central to their self-definition. Multilevel marketers not only validate their dreams of material goods, but also offer a system for making them reality. Omniflife’s corporate publications feature photo spreads of successful distributors in the mansions they bought with their commission checks. Jorge Vergara often writes a welcome letter from his plane en route to Antarctica or the Cannes film festival. In those concrete images of success, Esperanza spied a brake against falling from middle-class status. All she had to do was become a diligent entrepreneur and allow the market to reward her; that is, she had to assimilate the logic of neoliberalism.

As Esperanza told me in her living room in 2005, she had no other options. Although the skills of salesmanship that she had mastered in Omniflife would transfer to another direct selling organization, her hard-won network would not. In Michoacán’s formal economy, so few job opportunities awaited high school and college graduates that the state has become a primary exporter of labor to the United States (Martínez 2001). Lacking formal education, she had little reason for optimism. Applying for retail jobs in Morelia would be fruitless because Mexican employers openly discriminate against older applicants for work (Dickerson and Mandell 2006). Political protest did not enter her mind because, like the rest of the struggling Mexican middle class, she needed to earn money to support herself and her family. Even as it exacerbates inequality, neoliberal capitalism holds out the promise of increased purchasing power to upwardly mobile citizens who dedicate themselves to playing by the market rules. As long as she and other Omniflife

distributors are motivated by the need to reach their desired level of consumption, neoliberalism needs no violent push to win acceptance.

### ABSTRACT

*Since the 1980s, Mexican leaders have followed other Latin American countries in pursuing neoliberal economic policies designed to stimulate foreign investment, reduce public spending, and promote free trade. Recent studies of indigenous movements and popular protests challenge the idea that these market-based economic reforms enjoy a broad consensus and suggest that elites impose them by force. By turning the focus to middle-class Mexicans, I argue that some nonelite sectors of society avidly welcome the reign of the free market. Although they do not profit directly from unregulated capitalism, the middle class looks to neoliberalism to ensure access to the material markers of class status. The rising popularity of multilevel marketing companies in Mexico, which glorify consumption and celebrate the possibilities of entrepreneurship, demonstrates the appeal of neoliberalism to citizens fearful of diminished purchasing power. By tying consumption to globalized free markets, neoliberalism does not need coercion to win acceptance.*

**Keywords:** multilevel marketing, neoliberalism, middle class, consumption, Omniflife, Mexico

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*Editor's Note:* *Cultural Anthropology* has published a number of essays on Mexico, which also address issues of political economy: Ana María Alonso's (2004) "Conforming Disconformity: 'Mestizaje,' Hybridity, and the Aesthetics of Mexican Nationalism"; Alejandro Lugo's (1990) "Cultural Production and Reproduction in Ciudad Juárez, Mexico"; James H. McDonald's (1993) "Whose History? Whose Voice? Myth and Resistance in the Rise of the New Left in Mexico"; and Laura A. Lewis's (2001) "Of Ships and Saints: History, Memory, and Place in the Making of Moreno Mexican Identity."

*Cultural Anthropology* has also published other essays on "the middle class" in a range of national contexts, including Neeraj Vedwan's (2007) "Pesticides in Coca-Cola and Pepsi: Consumerism, Brand Image, and Public Interest in a Globalizing India"; Susan A. Reed's (2002) "Performing Respectability: The Beravā, Middle-Class Nationalism, and the Classicization of Kandyan Dance in Sri Lanka"; and Mark Liechty's (2005) "Carnal Economies: The Commodification of Food and Sex in Kathmandu."

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