

CORN, MARKETS, AND MOBILIZATION IN MEXICO

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Abstract:

In January 2007, Mexicans filled the Zócalo in Mexico City to express opposition to rising corn prices and corn imports. The price of tortillas had risen dramatically across the country—in some regions, prices had quadrupled since the summer. Marching under the banner “without corn there is no country,” consumers and producers, middle class and *campesinos* united to demand access to affordable, explicitly *Mexican* corn. Through an analysis of the discourse and symbols deployed during the *tortillazo*, this paper explains both the cooperation across sectoral lines and the participation of a largely unorganized consumer base by focusing on corn itself. How corn took on meanings in the Mexican context explains the broad-based appeal of the *tortillazo* protest. For many Mexicans, tortillas, and corn more generally, are not only a cornerstone of both urban and rural diets but also appear in well-known myths, serve as a centerpiece of daily ritual, and are part of how many conceive of themselves as Mexican. When individuals imagined that they or other Mexicans might not be able to consume a good at the center of daily life and imaginings of nation, they reached across established divides and took to the streets. These insights help us better understand broader patterns of mobilization and quiescence in response to market reforms, reminding us not only of the contingent and conditional character of protest but also of the importance of attention to what markets—and the goods getting marketized—mean across contexts.

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When, where, and how do people mobilize to oppose market reforms? When people do mobilize, why do mobilizations take the form they do? These questions have been the focus of social science scholarship for more than 30 years. Yet little consensus has emerged. Should we expect, as Polanyi (2001) famously argued in the 1940s, the emergence of a “double movement”—a movement to protect citizens from the dangers of unregulated markets.¹ Or should we expect to see disorganizing, weakening, and/or atomizing effects of market-oriented economic policies on social movements or civil society organizations (Agüero and Stark 1998; Oxhorn and Ducatenzeiler 1998; Kurtz 2004; Auyero 2007)? Protests over rising tortilla prices in Mexico in January 2007 offer an excellent lens through which to investigate these questions. The events in Mexico suggest that far from disorganizing or atomizing civil society organizations, marketization can work to create social mobilizations that bridge long-standing cleavages. To understand when and where this might happen, we need to take a more nuanced approach to questions about the links between markets and mobilization. To understand how and why markets might work to produce broad-based, widespread political resistance in some times and not others, we must understand the context in which markets operate and the meanings that marketization takes on.

The case and the argument

On January 31, 2007, thousands of Mexicans filled the Zócalo in Mexico City to express opposition to rising corn prices and corn imports. Farmers drove tractors from Aguascalientes and Puebla, union members came on buses from as far as the Yucatán in the east and Chihuahua in the north, and residents of the city itself came out to join them. The price of tortillas had risen

dramatically across the country; in some regions, prices had quadrupled since the summer. The price increases were arguably caused by a combination of increased international demand and the reduction of tariff barriers; it was no coincidence that the January demonstrations coincided with the final stages of implementation of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA). Marching under the banner *Sin Maíz No Hay País* (“without corn there is no country”), consumers and producers and middle-class workers and *campesinos* [peasants] united to demand access to affordable, explicitly *Mexican* corn. Recently inaugurated President Felipe Calderón moved quickly to cap prices, and the movement largely collapsed. Nevertheless, social movement organizations continued to work to demand NAFTA’s renegotiation and the protection of Mexican corn seed varieties.

While the protests were neither the first nor the most dramatic instance of popular resistance to market reforms in Mexico, they offer a unique lens through which to explore political mobilization in response to market reforms. The *tortillazo* protests brought *campesinos*, union members, civil society organizations, a largely unorganized urban consumer base, and political leaders from every major party together around a common concern.² The movement brought together individuals across occupational and regional divides despite internal sectoral squabbles. The cooperation evidenced that January was largely without precedent in the Mexican context. Furthermore, many of the participants did not belong to a formal sectoral organization or union, which is noteworthy. Many were participating in their first political mobilization, and none were in attendance at the behest of a union official or with the expectation of material compensation.

This paper attempts to explain the broad-based appeal of the 2007 *tortillazo* protests. What can the mobilizations tell us about the relationship among consumers, policy makers, and

free trade? Exploring these questions helps us develop better insights into how marketization shapes patterns of mobilization and quiescence. The scholarship on mobilization in the face of neoliberal reforms is significant (e.g., Walton and Seddon 1994; Oxfhorn and Ducatenzeiler 1998; Kurtz 2004; Yashar 2005; Silva 2009); however, variation across time and policy areas—as well as within countries—remains under explored. Even for scholars who focus on particular types of marketization, the *tortillazo* protests defy expectations. If, as Andy Baker (2003, 2009) finds, free trade is widely popular throughout Latin America, how should we understand the protests in response to the tortilla crisis? Scholarship on the relationship between social unrest and food prices (e.g., Hendrix et al. 2009, Hendrix and Haggard 2015) sheds some light on the question, but by focusing our attention on regime type and subsidy patterns, these studies overlook the ways in which culture shapes both policies and responses to them. The *tortillazo* protests demonstrate the contingent and conditional character of our current understandings of popular responses to market reforms in general, and to volatile food prices in particular.

This paper argues that we can best explain the emergence of a broad-based movement during the *tortillazo* by understanding the ways in which the perceived vagaries and vicissitudes of the market interacted with the meanings that corn took on in the Mexican context. The ways in which corn symbolized community help us better understand the alliances that emerged. To threaten corn was to threaten family and nation in ways that threats to other basic foods did not. An activist affiliated with a *campesino* organization remarked, “corn is a *tema aglutinador* [theme that ties things together]. We are all made with a base of corn. We knew there was incredible potential to bring all of Mexico together in a fight against so many years of neoliberal technocrats” (interview, June 2009, Mexico City). Many understood corn to be critical to life and

livelihood. It symbolized both the imagined community (Anderson 1991) of the Mexican nation and the quotidian communities (Simmons 2014) of family and neighborhood.

When markets created perceived insecurities around access to corn—when individuals imagined that they or other Mexicans might not be able to consume a good at the center of daily life and imaginings of nation—unexpected alliances formed and people voiced opposition in the streets. To explain why so many different organizations came together during the *tortillazo* and why their message resonated so widely, we must look to the ways corn as perceived material necessity and as symbol are intertwined in the Mexican context and how these meanings intersect with expectations of the state, communities, and markets. A threat to corn heightened expressions of national belonging by creating perceptions that what it means to be Mexican might be at risk.³

Mainstream social movement concepts do much to advance our understanding of the events surrounding the *tortillazo*.⁴ The movement relied heavily on available resources, took advantage of existing opportunity structures, and deftly employed frames.⁵ Frames played a particularly important role in bridging divides and mobilizing across classes and sectors. Calls to defend national patrimony and heritage functioned as powerful master frames (Snow and Benford 1992; Benford and Snow 2000). These frames explain the broad-based appeal of the movement, and the participation of previously unorganized communities in particular.

Even so, attention to frames alone misses a critical piece of the story. We must understand why and how the frames worked as they did. Why were such powerful master frames available to this particular movement at this particular moment and why did they resonate so broadly? To answer these questions, we must look to what corn meant in the Mexican context and how those meanings interacted with the perceived vulnerabilities created by markets.

There is no one mythology of corn in Mexico. Corn has multiple meanings throughout the country—meanings that coexist within individual people, cities, and towns, as well as within the borders of the Mexican nation-state. The variety of stories and legends, symbols and sayings related to corn in Mexico is overwhelming. The thread that connects them is that they make corn a symbol of *lo mexicano*, which translates loosely to “the Mexican way.” Corn has been mythologized and ritualized in a variety of ways. Contemporary scholarship suggests that corn was first developed in Mexico; the grain has been placed squarely at the core of contemporary conceptions of Mexican heritage. It also figures prominently in Mayan and Mexica mythology—man is literally forged from corn in the Mayan myth of creation as told in the *Popol Vuh* (Tedlock 1996). Furthermore, urban and rural practices revolve around the production and consumption of corn; both the cornfield and the tortilla are simultaneously revered and derided as emblematically Mexican. But while corn may signify different things to different people in different time and places, there is the sensibility that, across the country, it is imbued with special meaning. This knowledge that corn is revered has made the grain into a national symbol—a tie that brings together a political community of more than 40 million people and spans more than 760,000 square miles. For many Mexicans, corn has come to mean “Mexico”; it is deeply imbricated in understandings of Mexican family life and serves as a foundation for perceptions of communal belonging. An analysis of the discourse and symbols deployed by protest leaders and participants, as well as the media and other analysts during the *tortillazo*, shows how these meanings powerfully shaped political resistance.

The paper begins with a brief discussion of data and methods. It is then structured around three discursive themes: domesticity, class, and nation. The discourse used and symbols deployed during the *tortillazo* show how conceptions of family, domestic life, and class

(understood not only in reference to income, but also to occupation) intersected with conceptions of nation to shape this episode of contention. The themes cannot be neatly pried apart—much of the discourse and many of symbols analyzed in these pages are relevant to all three. However, by structuring the analysis around these three rubrics, we show how corn worked as a symbol for family and nation and how those meanings explain the cross-class, cross-sector, and cross-urban-rural political mobilization in Mexico in January 2007. The paper ends with an analysis of the final *megamarcha* that closed this brief contentious period.

Data and methods

The *tortillazo* protests pale in comparison to many other Mexican movements. Yet the largest of these movements tended to draw support from particular sectors or regions—they often addressed *campesino*, labor, or indigenous claims without inclusive overlaps.⁶ The tortilla crisis demonstrates how and why people bridge long-standing cleavages during particular moments of contention. The mobilizations in Mexico dominated national headlines for only a month, yet attention to this single, short-lived episode of contention was a broad-based, widespread example of resistance to markets. Analysis of the case tells us much about conceptions of communal belonging and how those conceptions might clash with the politics and policies of a neoliberal state. In doing so, it creates new possibilities for theorizing about the intersection of markets and processes of social mobilization.

This paper is a product of interpretive historical and ethnographic research. These approaches are particularly well suited to the questions at hand for two reasons. First, through enmeshing myself in the worlds I sought to study, I hoped to learn what particular actions, words, or other symbols might mean to the Mexicans with whom I interacted. I could explore the

ways in which practices that have never been “put to paper” (Parkinson 2013, 420) order daily lives and are rendered meaningful. Second, I could avoid individualist assumptions about the logics of collective action and instead treat actors as socially embedded (Wedeen 2002), allowing me to explore how family and nation were constructed and how rising corn prices might be perceived as a threat to them.

I conducted fieldwork in Mexico during the winter, spring, and summer of 2009. The analysis is based largely on research conducted in Mexico City. I identified interviewees through newspaper reports and other publications as well as “snowball” sampling, whereby an interview with one individual would yield connections to one or more others. In addition, I spoke with local residents about corn and observed practices of consumption, cultivation, and celebration. I was also able to participate in meetings and activities of the *Sin Maíz No Hay País* campaign. I participated in daily life by taking part in social gatherings, political events and protests, and office activities. I observed formal meetings and workshop sessions; read newspapers; went to plays, concerts, and movies; and watched local television. These experiences gave me the tools to make sense of particular actions or words in the context in which they took place or were deployed.

Historical research involves analysis of written materials including regional and national newspapers, primary source documents (e.g., movement declarations, petitions, and pamphlets), and scholarly works.⁷ I relied heavily on video clips of the movements’ activities or other relevant events as well as photographs taken by private observers or photojournalists. My observations of lived experiences in 2009 in Mexico helped me interpret these earlier texts, understand the work that particular words or phrases may have been doing in movement slogans, and the ways in which particular symbols worked to generate unity on the streets. While I was

not in Mexico during the *tortillazo*, I was able to draw on earlier experiences living, working, and researching in the country in 1994, 1998, and 2001. These experiences shored up claims about the ways in which corn produces conceptions of Mexican-ness.

Domesticity and nation

The home—a critical place for the production and reproduction of Mexican national belonging—was one of the central sites of perceived vulnerability during the *tortillazo*. Corn-based foods, whether prepared at home or consumed on the streets, have become a critical ingredient in perceptions of *lo mexicano*.⁸ During the protests, domestic concerns intersected powerfully with a sense of national belonging, as it was not simply “my family” but also “Mexican families” that were understood to be at risk.

The first signs of the mobilizing power of connections between domesticity and tortillas appeared soon after the price hikes began. As Calderón traveled to the states of Mexico and Veracruz in early January, angry residents greeted him. On the streets of Chalco in the state of Mexico, groups of women welcomed Calderón with shouts of “*¡Que baje la tortilla!* [That tortillas come down!]” “*¡y la leche!* [and milk!].” In Veracruz, housewives met Calderón with signs and chants: “*¡Sí a la tortilla, no al PAN!* [Yes to tortillas, no to the PAN/bread]” and “*¡soberanía ya!* [sovereignty now!].” They demanded the return of *tortibonos* (tortilla subsidies) and the end of the monopolies that controlled the production and distribution of corn flour (Núñez and Vega 2007).



Protesters in Acapulco, Mexico, on January 12, 2007. Two signs read: “If you aren’t in agreement with the price increase of tortillas! Sound your horn!” and “Tortibonos, now!” (Photo courtesy of *La Jornada*)

Calls of “yes to tortillas, no to bread/PAN” speak to the lack of substitutability of tortillas in Mexico. The slogan, of course, also highlights the way in which Calderón’s party, the Partido Acción Nacional (PAN), was immediately blamed for the tortilla crisis. PAN was at once an inferior good—bread—and a political party responsible for making a part of what it is to be Mexican—the tortilla—increasingly inaccessible. The comments of a tamale vendor interviewed by *Refoma* later in the month speak directly to perceptions of substitutability. “The tortilla is the most important thing on any family’s table,” she claimed, “but it looks like they [government officials/business owners] want to kill us with hunger ... They know that what they want goes up but one has to buy it anyway.” The imperative—*having* to buy corn—seems clear. And perhaps for a tamale vendor, there is, indeed, no substitute for corn. But many of her clients for whom other options are available will continue to buy tamales, even if they buy fewer or sacrifices are made elsewhere.

That sovereignty also emerged in these early protests is unsurprising, but only when the ways in which corn and tortillas work as symbols of the Mexican family and nation are taken into account. Calls for sovereignty speak to the domestic sphere. The demand for “sovereignty now!” can refer to the ability to decide what to buy based not on unpredictable markets but rather on a family’s individual assessment of its wants and needs; a family should be sovereign over its own kitchen. The protester claims to perceive rising corn prices as a threat to this most intimate of quotidian communities. High tortilla prices relocate decision making from mothers or fathers shopping for the day’s meal to the abstract, invisible hand of the market, challenging family providers’ ability to decide for themselves what to cook in their own home and what to feed their family. Family routines and perceptions of welfare needs are rendered insecure by the unpredictable forces of the market and the expectation that the state can no longer be counted on to intervene.

These calls also register at the national level. Domestic practices cannot be pried apart from conceptions of, and desires for, national belonging. The family kitchen is one of the places in which nationalism is produced and the nation brought into being (Appadurai 1988). Family and nation work together to make a threat to tortillas more than a financial hardship. Furthermore, high corn and/or tortilla prices suggested that officials entrusted to manage the Mexican state could not control something of critical importance. The references suggest both that Mexico should not have to rely on foreign markets for its supply of corn and that it should not simply accept market prices for something as critical to the nation as corn. A *campesina* woman who had traveled in from Morelos to march on Avenida Juárez, a main street near Mexico City’s historic center, on January 14 invoked both of these expectations in an interview two years later. “Corn,” she claimed, “has maintained us in our families, it has maintained us in

our communities ... we have to defend corn because through defending it we defend our autonomy and independence” (interview, May 2009, Mexico City). Her defense of corn simultaneously defends individual autonomy and independence—her personal ability to purchase the foods she wants to cook and consume and that of the imagined community of the Mexican nation. Sovereignty—of both family and nation—was at stake.

The reference to milk—“*¡Que baje la tortilla!* [That tortillas come down!]” “*¡y la leche!* [and milk!]”—in these early protests is particularly illustrative of the mobilizing power of a market-driven threat to corn and tortillas and how tortillas worked to symbolize the intersection of family and nation, whereas milk did not. According to the 2005 National Survey of Household Income and Spending, 6 percent of spending in an “average” Mexican household was dedicated to tortillas.⁹ Whereas this surpasses many other oft-consumed items (e.g., sugar, fruit, eggs, and chicken), it is roughly on par with average spending on milk. A similar percentage increase in milk and tortilla prices should have a similar material impact on household spending. Although milk is clearly a critical part of the diet, it plays little (if any) role in conceptions of Mexican heritage or in contemporary food culture outside the home. For many, milk seems to mean family and nourishment, but in a way that fails to index the broader community or evoke connections to nation. Milk is about taking care of one’s own family; it is neither about patterns of communal rituals of consumption and celebration nor about pride in nation or conceptions of Mexican-ness.

Of course, it is rare that world events unfold in such a way as to create conditions that align perfectly with a social scientist’s object of inquiry—in the years surrounding the tortilla crisis, milk prices did not undergo a spike equivalent to that of tortillas in January 2007. However, the price of milk sold through the Leche Liconsa (government-run) stores did rise in

the fall of 2006.¹⁰ After maintaining a 3.5 peso/liter price for five years (a price that was, notably, about half that of major commercial brands), Liconsa increased prices to 4.5 pesos—a 28.6 percent increase—on November 17. National newspapers covered the increase but only briefly, with four articles appearing in *El Universal* during the month of November and coverage dropping off entirely after the director of Liconsa publicly defended the increase and stated that he would not reverse or temper the policy change. The increase received attention on the floor of the legislature (Gómez 2006), but little, if any, social movement organizing took place.

With the tortilla crisis, however, protesters brought the increase in milk prices to national attention. As shown in the slogan, milk was often tacked onto the end of a declaration or comment about tortillas. The comments of a domestic worker in her twenties in Tlalpan resemble those of other protest participants. When asked why she chose to mobilize against rising tortilla prices but had stayed home when milk prices rose, she responded: “Of course I was upset with what happened with milk. It became harder to feed my kids overnight. But tortillas felt different. They are part of who we are. I don’t know” (interview, *tortillazo* participant, March 2009, Mexico City). Many interviewees identified a “feeling” around tortillas and invoked the notion of tortillas being a part of a “we” or “us.”

Deborah Gould’s (2009) concept of *emotional habitus* sheds light on these professed feelings around tortillas, as well as the ways in which many interviewees ended their remarks with an ambivalent statement like the “I don’t know” quoted here. Drawing on Bourdieu (1990, 1977), Gould argues, “Operating beneath conscious awareness, the emotional habitus of a social group provides members with an emotional disposition, with a sense of what and how to feel” (2009, 34). Gould’s concept “locates feelings within social relations and practices” (*ibid.*, 35), which helps explain why the socially produced meanings that tortillas take on can evoke such

strong emotional reactions. The concept also elucidates the seemingly unconscious, natural qualities to those feelings. Attitudes toward tortillas were so deeply engrained through habitus that it was often difficult for sources to explain where the feelings came from or why they were experienced so powerfully.

It is not surprising that these feelings became attached to or manifested themselves as feelings of national belonging. When pressed further on who was included in the statement “tortillas are part of who we are,” answers differed little. Almost invariably, “we” was meant to refer to “Mexicans.” Tortillas symbolized nation in ways that milk did not—as a result, a threat to them was perceived differently. No one said he or she failed to protest the milk price increase because it was comparably smaller than the increase in tortilla prices.¹¹

While increasing milk prices failed to translate into national mobilization, resistance to rising corn prices quickly spread; protests in the states of Mexico, Guerrero, and Veracruz were not isolated incidents. Simultaneous mobilizations took place in front of the Ministry of Economy in the Federal District, and the comments of participants offer additional insights into the ways in which corn, family, and nation can be intimately intertwined. *El Universal* quoted a Mexico City resident present during the January 12 mobilization in Mexico City as saying, “if you don’t eat tortillas, nothing else fills you up” (Simón 2007). Tortillas do, indeed, satisfy caloric needs. But they also satisfy appetites for national belonging and domesticity, for family and community. Tortillas nourish conceptions of what it means to be a “good” Mexican mother or provider, reminding consumers of both their heritage and contemporary national practices.

Citywide *cacerolazos* (an oft-used repertoire of contention in Latin America involving the banging of pots and pans on the street) on January 17 offered a glimpse into the ways in which domesticity continued to surface as a tool of political protest across diverse

neighborhoods. That afternoon, Mexicans from a variety of occupational and social classes left their homes and workplaces to meet on corners throughout the city. Participants banged pots and pans and carried signs that read, “*Abajo el PAN, viva la tortilla* [Down with the PAN/bread, long live the tortilla,]” “*En defensa de la economía popular* [In defense of the popular economy—also understood to mean “family” economy, or economy “of the people”],” “*Sin Maíz No Hay País* [Without Corn There Is No Country],” and *Sin Maíz No Somos País* [Without Corn We Aren’t a Country].” Drivers honked their horns in support as they passed, and the protests stopped traffic in the upper-class neighborhood of Coyoacán; its more middle-class neighbor, Tlalpan; and Gustavo A. Madero, one of Mexico City’s northernmost and poorest regions.

In spite of the familiarity of the tactics involved, the *cacerolazos* are illustrative of how the *tortillazo* protests stand apart from “the usual,” where contentious politics are concerned in Mexico. Union, *campesino*, civil society organizations, and political parties issued the call for the *cacerolazo*. Yet reports suggest that as many as half of the participants were unaffiliated with any of Mexico’s highly organized sectors. These individuals came out because they heard about the mobilization from a neighbor or family member or on the radio (interviews, January–July 2009, Mexico City). The claim—often leveled at protesters in Mexico City—that participants were only there because the union would pass out favors (something I heard repeatedly from government officials) cannot explain the participation of unaffiliated Mexican citizens from a variety of class backgrounds in the protest action that day.

Class, sector, and nation

The events surrounding the *tortillazo* brought class to the fore through both the composition of the protests themselves and the language participants and analysts used to

describe the crisis. Cross-sectoral, cross-class, cross–urban-rural cooperation dominated the response from the outset. Union members joined *campesinos* and a largely unorganized base of urban consumers to mobilize against rising tortilla prices. The language they used to voice their opposition often invoked neither personal nor sectoral interests but conceptions of national responsibilities and aspirations. The protests became a fight for “the people” and “the poor.” In particular, the crisis suggested an expectation that the poor reaffirm and reproduce their national belonging through tortillas. During the *tortillazo*, a column in the Mexican daily newspaper *Reforma* called a packet of tortillas “one of the most sacred patriotic symbols” (Dehesa 2007). The protests also became a fight for Mexico, as if embodied in the “right” to consume tortillas was an effort to preserve a practice that, for many, signified the nation itself.

“A thing on which we could agree”

The declared universality of the claim to affordable corn and tortillas was readily apparent from the first protests. Participants were defending what they conceived of as a widely shared right. This was not about transportation workers or coffee farmers but rather about a threat to “the people.” One participant called the protest a “defense of her rights” (Ledezma 2007). Another added, “we did not come to talk about an individual or party problem: it is a problem for all of the people (*pueblo*).” Individual, personal relationships with the good and a far broader set of responsibilities to “all of the people” are both sacrosanct. The use of *el pueblo* simultaneously evoked a community of all Mexicans, irrespective of class or occupation, and a notion of something understood to be truly Mexican. Even though it is a frame often deployed by the left, the concept of *el pueblo* carries an unimpeachable authenticity—something to be

esteemed and protected.¹² In claiming to defend *el pueblo*, protesters situated themselves as defending something quintessentially Mexican.

These conceptions created uncommon alliances. The *tortillazo* protests brought together organized groups—most notably *campesino* and urban worker unions that were often on opposite sides of a given issue. Furthermore, the protests bridged divides within sectors, bringing together *campesino* organizations plagued by personal and political animosities since the end of the El Camno No Aguanta Más movement in 2003. But the protests also brought unexpected participants to the streets—urban consumers without formal sectoral affiliations.

Campesino organizations were the first to talk about working together to demand government action. The structure of the Mexican corn market meant that the increased prices benefited farmers marginally, if at all.¹³ However, the price increases did hit farmers as consumers. Although many produce their own tortillas, few do so year round. Seasonal production forces many farmers to consume what they can of their harvest and sell the rest. The remainder of the year, these farmers purchase corn and corn products. Large *campesino* organizations including the Corporación Nacional Campesino (CNC), Central Campesino Cardenista (CCC), the Confederación Revolucionaria de Obreros y Campesinos (CROC), and the Asociación Nacional de Empresas Comercializadoras (ANEC) joined forces to rally their membership bases.

Urban union members, beginning with the Metro workers' union and the umbrella transportation union, organized shortly after their *campesino* counterparts. Having only just negotiated a minimum wage agreement for the year, union leaders argued that the increase in tortilla prices made a mockery of their small wage gains and undermined members' ability to meet their families' basic needs (interviews, January–July 2009, Mexico City).¹⁴ Both the

collaboration between unions and *campesino* organizations and the language used to describe that collaboration suggest that tortillas served as a powerful unifier. Francisco Hernández, leader of the Unión Nacional de Trabajadores (UNT), recalls thinking, “We had to organize. If we weren’t going to fight for tortillas, what were we going to fight for?” Hernández treats mobilization as a political imperative, something around which there was no choice. “We could all work together on this,” he went on to say, “It was easy” (interview, July 15, 2009, Mexico City). *Campesino* leader Max Correa used similar language when describing the way in which the movement came together so quickly. “It was pretty clear to us,” he argued, “If we weren’t going to fight for tortillas, what would we fight for? We had to mobilize [against the tortilla price increases] and working together seemed like the natural thing to do” (interview with Max Correa, president of the CCC, May 28, 2009, Mexico City). Correa’s question suggests not that he was simply looking for a strategic mobilization tool but that there was an “of course” about the protests. He implies that if they were going to fight for anything, it would be for tortillas. As their statements make clear, the way in which corn itself served as a uniting force made the necessity for mobilization seem obvious, and working together “easy” and “natural.” Already highly organized, unions and *campesino* organizations had thousands of members in the state of Mexico alone, and each organization had well-established and tested mechanisms for mobilization. Once their leadership decided to cooperate, that these groups were able to rally their constituencies is not particularly surprising.

The mobilizing power of coalitions of citizen and environmental organizations is more puzzling. A number of Mexico City–based organizations were well versed in small protest and staged action but had little previous experience getting large numbers of Mexicans to the streets. Others had never organized outside of their *colonia*. Yet these groups quickly added their voices

to the opposition, and many set to work mobilizing at the neighborhood level. The so-called trisector alliance of *campesinos*, unions, and civil society was well in place by the end of the first week in January.

This trisector alliance soon joined with political leaders from the Frente Amplio Progresista (a leftist political coalition) on January 10 to call for a march “in defense of national *soberanía alimentaria* [food/nutrient sovereignty]” later in the month (Balboa 2007). The press conference included the electricity, telephone, and social security workers’ unions, in addition to six *campesino* organizations. Partido de la Revolución Democrático (PRD) leader Porfirio Muñoz Ledo called for a general strike because there was a “coming together of independent unions” that had not been seen for 40 years (Aguirre and Salazar 2007). One *campesino* activist who appeared to be in his early 50s recalls, “there was a real sense of a coming together—we were given a moment, a thing on which we could agree” (interview, February 20, 2009, Mexico City).¹⁵

Many social movement organizers were keenly aware of the ways in which the tortilla crisis cut across issues of class and occupation. Max Correa said, “Listen, we could all agree. We all wanted the same thing. Tortillas are part of what it is to be Mexican. Maybe we were not in agreement about some of the answers, but everyone—rich, poor, worker, *campesino*—we all wanted everyone to be able to buy the tortillas they needed” (interview, Mexico City, 2009). Laura Becerra, president of Equipo Pueblo, an organization aimed at strengthening civil society, reflected,

There was a *conjunto* [coming together] of the demands with the *tortillazo*. The three sectors [unions, *campesinos*, civil society] were finally really able to come together. It was a real *coyuntura* [coming together in time, critical moment]. Citizens could really

identify with the fight, even those that weren't members of unions or other organizations; we all felt violated so we all participated. (Interview, June 4, 2009, Mexico City)

Protecting the poor

Perceptions of those who would suffer the most and calls to defend them infused the discourse surrounding the *tortillazo*. An oft-repeated phrase of people who participated in events such as the *cacerloazos* on the 17th and those interviewed by local TV news programs (TV Azteca, Televisa) and in Mexico City dailies (*La Jornada*, *Reforma*, *El Universal*) was that tortillas were important because a price increase affected “*los que menos tienen* [those who have the least].” Claims of concern for the poor bridged political and class divides. The idea that the poor should be able to afford tortillas (or, at the very least, the expression of that idea) was not limited to the poor themselves but emerged as almost a national consensus. To this author's knowledge, not one newspaper article or editorial called for the poor to simply eat something else. Although there was no consensus on how to make tortillas affordable, to ask Mexicans to replace this most Mexican of foods with something else seemed to violate *lo mexicano*.

Whereas many stated that they were having trouble making ends meet with tortilla prices so high, a number wanted to speak not for themselves but for Mexico's poor. The comments of one middle-class participant in the January mobilizations were illustrative of those of many others. “Poor people eat more tortillas than the rest of us,” she remarked, “so this was really affecting them. We have to protect them” (interview, *tortillazo* protest participant, June 25, 2009, Mexico City). In the calls for the first coordinated protests, union leaders used language that would reappear throughout the rest of the crisis, arguing that they were fighting for Mexico's

poorest: “This hits those who have the least” so government must act, they claimed (Pensamiento 2007).¹⁶

The right of Mexico’s poorest to continue to eat tortillas seemed worth defending. Although middle- and upper-class Mexicans no longer turned to tortillas as a nutritional centerpiece themselves, it seemed critical to some to preserve the tortilla as a staple for the country’s poorest. Mexico’s wealthiest consume less than 15 percent of their daily calories in tortillas (though, interestingly, this number implies that tortilla consumption is, indeed, still a daily occurrence, even for Mexico’s wealthy), whereas its poorest often get more than 70 percent of their daily calories from tortillas. When prices reached their highest point in mid-January, some Mexicans paid more than 150 percent more for tortillas than they had the previous August. A government study estimated that at the peak, spending on tortillas within Mexico’s poorest 10 percent reached more than 17 percent of average monthly income—up from 6.8 percent the previous August. In contrast, Mexico’s wealthiest 10 percent increased their spending on tortillas from 0.3 percent to 0.4 percent of their average monthly income (Tépach M. 2007).¹⁷

Yet even for many for whom the price increase had little impact on monthly spending, the tortilla crisis offended their sensibilities as Mexicans. “It is a shame,” one relatively affluent adult male participating in the protests reflected, “The *tortillazo* undermined the way we are supposed to live as Mexicans. We lose a piece of ourselves when we can’t all eat tortillas” (interview, *tortillazo* protest participant, April 2009, Mexico City). Other interviews suggested a sentiment of “while we can look elsewhere, or even endure the price increases, it is critical that they maintain the foundation of Mexican culture that is the tortilla” (interviews, April–July 2009, Mexico City). It was almost as if the idea of the accessibility and affordability of tortillas was more important than the actual prices.

The price pact and the *megamarcha*

On January 18, Calderón announced the implementation of the price pact. The dynamics of the movement shifted in its wake. Five million (of the existing 65 million in the country) *tortillerías* committed to sell tortillas at no higher than 8.5 pesos/kilo through April 30. Supermarkets agreed to sell tortillas at 6 pesos/kilo, and the government distributor, Diconsa (responsible for selling goods largely in rural communities other vendors did not reach), agreed to sell corn at 3.5 pesos/kilo and corn flour at 5 pesos/kilo. The pact fundamentally changed the dynamics of mobilization and participation. It appears to have relieved perceptions of insecurity by demonstrating that the government would not let the crisis pass unaddressed. It had intervened and generated an expectation of stabilized tortilla prices.¹⁸ Tortillas would not be left to the vicissitudes of markets, and corn would not be subject to monopoly pricing or the evils of speculation. Nevertheless, social movement organizers continued to prepare for a large-scale protest at the end of the month. With the price pact in place, however, enthusiasm for the march dwindled, and the movement appeared to lose momentum.

The implementation of the price pact mattered for the trajectory of this episode of contention. Mexican authorities created a political spectacle that served to validate protesters' claims, communicate that those claims had been heard, and suggest that the state was on their side. The president declared that he considered the local repercussions of the international increase in the price of corn "unacceptable" and that he would "firmly" punish anyone who "took advantage of the needs of the people" (*Cinco Días*, 2007). The pact itself may have been all show—it was, after all, voluntary, and many *tortillerías* did not sign on.¹⁹ But the president's show had a political effect. It suggested that Calderón and his team were listening and sent a

message that they would not, in spite of their commitments to open markets, let the price of tortillas be set by the whims of the market. What ultimately happened to prices is almost irrelevant. The pact removed the anxiety that came from insecurity by creating— even if it was only an illusion—the perception that the state would not let the situation get out of control. Reflecting on the events, Victor Suárez, president of the Asociación Nacional de Empresas Comercializadoras de Productores del Campo (ANEC), recalls that Calderón’s price pact served as an “*engaño* [trick].” The pact “tricked the public into thinking the problem was taken care of. We lost the regular, middle-class people we needed with the price pact. They [members of the administration] knew how to co-opt the people” (interview, February 2009, Mexico City). Suárez interprets the pact as a disingenuous signal that worked to produce quiescence. Disingenuous or not, the pact did send the message that the administration was listening.

January 31, 2007

Yet even as the movement appeared to sputter, inter-sectoral cooperation continued to dominate. The march to the Zócalo on January 31 was a moment of exemplary coordination and unity among and within groups from a variety of backgrounds with a variety of agendas. With the price pact in place, the cost of tortillas no longer appeared as a central rallying cry. Instead, movement organizers turned toward an emphasis on *soberanía alimentaria*, a frame that continued to highlight connections between tortillas and nation. The tortilla crisis helped bring identification as Mexicans to the fore, encouraging broad-based, if brief, collaboration among unexpected interlocutors.

Even in the wake of the price pact, union, *campesino*, and civil society leaders continued to organize the drive toward January 31. Leaders from the UNT—representing more than 100

independent unions—and the Mexican Electricity Union (SME) pledged the support and participation of their members. The union at the *Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México* (UNAM), the telephone workers' union, the social security workers' union, and the miners' union also began to rally their membership for the event. Factions of the farmers' movement, including the CNC, Unión Nacional de Organizaciones Regionales Campesinas (UNORCA), Consejo Nacional de Organizaciones Campesinas (CONOC), Consejo Nacional de Organismos Rurales y Pesqueros (CONORP), and the CCC, continued their commitment to both work together and bring in members from all over the country for the march. The debtors' organization, El Barzón, also joined in the planning and reached out to its national membership to rally participants. The National Citizens' Coalition (a collective of women's groups, environmental groups, consumer organizations, and other civil society organizations) organized participation at the local, neighborhood level. The Democratic Alliance of Civil Organizations (ADOC), an umbrella organization that coordinated civil society activities throughout the country, also joined as a driving force in efforts to mobilize previously unorganized citizens. Small-scale protests continued, but all of the organizational effort was now behind putting together a large-scale march on January 31.

As planning for the march progressed, leaders from each organization may very well have had their own interests or goals in mind. A number of Mexican officials called the protests “opportunistic,” claiming that the organizations driving the movement cared little about corn prices and had merely been taking advantage of an issue they knew would galvanize a broad base of participants (interviews, May–July 2009, Mexico City). Indeed, some leaders even claimed unabashedly to have taken advantage of the crisis to push a prior anti-neoliberal or anti-PAN agenda. In the *tortillazo*, they saw an opportunity to mobilize Mexicans to join long-standing

fighters against free trade, in favor of subsidies for the countryside, or against the PAN (interviews, January–July 2009). Prominent public intellectual Sergio Sarmiento explicitly called the march a purely political move staged by Calderón's opponents in the PRD and Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI) (Sarmiento 2007). Opposition parties did not want to let a moment of weakness pass without taking full advantage of the potential for organized protest. Yet perhaps counterintuitively, Sarmiento's cry of opportunism offers further support for the argument made here. In the language of social movement theory, the tortilla crisis offered an extraordinary political opportunity—the crisis gave the opposition an issue around which it could come together. But that the opportunity was possible at all is a product of the meanings with which corn was imbued.²⁰ Regardless of activists' own perceptions of the role of corn in constructing communities, they capitalized on the broad-based appeal of the issue. The political opportunity existed only because of the ways in which tortillas symbolized community in Mexico.

On January 31, 2007, Mexican activists began the protest from different spots throughout the city, aiming to converge on the central plaza. The protesters easily accomplished their goal—no confrontations between city, state, or federal authorities and the protest participants were reported. The Mexican Union Front (FSM), led by the SME, started at the Monument to the Revolution. The UNT, including social security, telephone, pilot, and transportation workers, started at the Zócalo itself. *Campesino* organizations began at the Angel of Independence; the Citizens' Alliance for Democracy and other citizens' groups began at the monument to Columbus (Muñoz et al. 2007). The leaders of the protest called it a “march for food independence and in defense of salaries and employment.” The movement had even, for a time, mobilized housewives, middle-class businessmen and businesswomen, and Mexicans who

ordinarily closed their doors and stayed home when Mexico's sectoral organizations sought to mobilize the masses.



The Zócalo in Mexico City, January 31, 2007 (image courtesy of *La Jornada*).

Concluding remarks

Jeffrey Pilcher argues that “Despite centuries of efforts to change them, Mexicans remain a people of corn” (1998, 6). Corn cultivation and consumption are both part of an “ancient tradition” that must be protected to ensure that being Mexican still means something and they are simply a description of what “we do” as Mexicans. Corn and community are intimately intertwined in the Mexican context. The preceding analysis of the tortilla crisis shows how a social movement can emerge when markets threaten to weaken or reconfigure these ties. The *tortillazo* reminded Mexicans of corn’s place in their lives and livelihoods, created a perception of corn’s potential vulnerability, tapped into deeply rooted connections to family, evoked perceptions of class and countryside, and heightened feelings of national belonging. As a result,

politicians crossed party lines to voice common goals, sectoral organizations with histories plagued by disagreement mounted a joint campaign, and “ordinary” citizens banged pots and pans in the streets in protest.

Frames were key in this process, but how and why they worked the way they did requires attention to the signifying work that corn does in the Mexican context. Frames related to family, security, sovereignty, and nation can be potent mobilization tools. But to be effective, they must resonate. The meanings with which corn was already imbued could not have been the product of clever framing by social movement activists already opposed to NAFTA, fighting on behalf of *soberanía alimentaria*, or working to secure better union wages. Although a number of organizations were ready to be mobilized in protest, the frames were powerful political tools only because they tapped into what corn and tortillas already meant to many Mexicans.

Attention to sequencing underscores this point. Social movement leaders began to organize opposition to the *tortillazo* shortly after the price hike started to make national news. But they were, in fact, not the first movers. The protests that greeted Calderón as he traveled the country on January 12 appear to have been largely spontaneous and unorganized. The frames the participants deployed went to the heart of the claims that surfaced for the rest of the movement; yet the fact that social movement organizers had not yet begun to rally their followers suggests that the demands were not the product of a clever social movement leader’s attempts to strategize. The anti-NAFTA, anti-globalization, pro-countryside, pro-union activists joined a movement already in progress and therefore cannot claim to have shaped the contours of these early demands. More importantly, however, the frames only appealed in the first place because of how corn and tortillas had come to mean family and nation. Absent those meanings, claims of,

for example, “without corn there is no country” would have done little to galvanize a popular mobilization.

A counterfactual is also useful. It is hard to imagine that a frame painting rising sugar prices as a threat to the Mexican *pueblo* would gain significant traction within the country. That tortillas can be framed as goods that are synecdochic for or emblematic of the Mexican *pueblo* in ways that resonate powerfully throughout the country is the critical point. Tortillas and corn were *already* understood by many Mexicans to symbolize the Mexican nation, and to wed nationalism to domesticity.

Ultimately, it is only when we, as analysts, incorporate the meanings of corn and tortillas into our work that the events of the *tortillazo* become intelligible. Demands for “sovereignty now!” or declarations that tortillas are *patria* hardly make sense when high tortilla prices are understood in purely material terms. However, when we see the threat as more than simply a price increase, we can understand how and why the *tortillazo* worked as a reminder of shared heritage, potential national or state vulnerabilities, domestic routines, or commitments to the poor or *lo campesino*. Each helped bring national belonging to the fore and, in doing so, helped produce a broad-based, widespread resistance movement.

These findings have important implications for future research on resistance to market reforms and responses to food crises. The events of the *tortillazo* suggest that we should pay careful attention not only to the material impact of markets or prices but also to the ways in which the goods at stake might symbolize imagined or quotidian communities or heighten feelings of insecurity or vulnerability. These dynamics might shed light on the kinds of coalitions that form and why they do so. Goods that take on meanings that cut across traditional cleavages may have the power to mobilize across those cleavages as well. The preceding analysis also

suggests that paying attention to the symbolic dimension of anti-market mobilizations could help us better understand other aspects of mobilization processes. For example, the mention of dramatic food price increases often precedes images of riots. Yet the mobilizations in response to rising tortilla prices in Mexico were planned, coordinated, and consistently peaceful. Perhaps attention to the ways in which some foodstuffs symbolize family and nation, while others do not, would shed light on why some episodes of contention are seemingly sudden and violent, while others are planned and peaceful. The *tortillazo* protests show that there is more going on in anti-market mobilizations than political openings or perceptions of material hardship.

Endnotes

¹ In particular, see Silva (2009).

² The coalition that emerged on the streets defied historical expectations. Cooperation between unions and farmers' organizations evidenced in January 2007 is not routine. Furthermore, splits within the *campesino* movement, particularly in the aftermath of El Campo No Aguanta Más (ECNAM)—a national movement to secure agrarian reforms—had hindered cooperation between organizations with large membership bases, such as the National Association of Commercial Businesses (ANEC), the Cardenist Farmers' Union (CCC), and the National Union of Regional, Autonomous *Campesino* Organizations (UNORCA). The post-ECNAM splits in the *campesino* movement have been the subject of significant scholarship (in particular, see Sánchez Albarrán 2007).

³ See Brubaker (2004) and Wedeen (2008) for discussions of the ways in which feelings of “groupness” can be heightened.

⁴ See McAdam et al. (1996); Tarrow (1998); and McAdam et al. (2001) for good overviews of mainstream social movement theory. See Goodwin et al. (2001); Aminzade et al. (2001); Goodwin and Jasper (2004) for prominent critiques.

⁵ The protests that grew out of rising tortilla prices in the winter of 2007 drew on the networks and connections developed during the course of both the now well-known indigenous movement that began in Chiapas in 1994 and the sustained efforts of Mexican farmers during the ECNAM movement in 2003.

⁶ The 1994 Zapatista uprising is one exception. The movement galvanized urban and rural, rich and poor in Mexico.

⁷ I relied on *El Sol de México*, *Milenio*, *El Universal*, *La Jornada*, and *Reforma* for newspaper coverage of corn and tortillas beginning in July 2006 and extending through the time of fieldwork. I conducted a more targeted search prior to those dates, looking for coverage of NAFTA specifically, and marketization more generally.

⁸ See Pilcher (1998).

⁹ Encuesta Nacional de Ingresos y Gastos de los Hogares 2005.

¹⁰ At the time, Leche Liconsa served approximately 6 million Mexicans, 80 percent of whom resided in Mexico's urban areas.

¹¹ The limited reach of Leche Liconsa might be another explanation for the relatively muted reaction, but this also failed to surface during interviews.

¹² *El pueblo* is often a frame specific to protest on the left, but in ordinary language use, it does not carry leftist connotations.

¹³ Commercial corn farmers sell their produce twice per year (or just once if they only have one harvest). The price at the date of sale is the price these farmers get. As a result, if prices go up between October (a potential date of sale) and December, farmers do not benefit.

¹⁴ See also coverage in *La Jornada* and *Reforma*.

¹⁵ The analysis here focuses on collaboration among social movement activists within the state of Mexico. However, protests were not limited to the capital state or city. At the national level, a number of civil society organizations came together to call themselves the *Cruzada Nacional en Defensa de la Tortilla*. The coalition included, but was not limited to, groups in Monterrey, Puebla, Morelos, Michoacán, and Jalisco.

¹⁶ This discussion suggests that perhaps many Mexicans simply seemed to care about the welfare of the poor regardless of whether or not the threat manifested itself in high tortilla prices or some other material hardship. There are two reasons to doubt the power of this alternative. First, if claims were based purely on material welfare, there would be little reason to protest, as wheat remained a potentially cheaper substitute. Second, there is little historical precedent to suggest that large numbers of Mexicans mobilize when they perceive that the material well-being of the poor is at risk.

¹⁷ The study cited here reports that in 2006, Mexico's poorest families—those in the bottom 10 percent of income—reported an average monthly income of 906 pesos. Those in the top 10 percent reported 31,498 pesos of average monthly income (Tépach M. 2007, 5).

¹⁸ Whether that stabilization was actually accomplished is not what matters. It is the perception here that is important.

¹⁹ By January 20, representatives of millers' associations were already saying that it would be impossible to reduce the price of tortillas to 8.5 pesos/kilo (Gómez 2007). In the state of Quintana Roo, local leaders of masa and tortilla workers declared that they would continue to sell tortillas at 12 pesos/kilo (Parra 2007).

²⁰ See Simmons (2014) for a discussion of meaning making and grievances.

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