SIN MAÍZ, NO HAY PAÍS: CORN IN MEXICO UNDER NEOLIBERALISM, 1940-2008

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In Mexican history, corn is far more than a culinary ingredient or farm product. Corn has been a cultural emblem and key component to the country’s national identity that throughout the twentieth-century the Mexican government embraced. However, since the adoption of neoliberal economic policies, which by necessity involves particular political policies, many Mexicans feel that corn’s significance in the country has changed. Over the last three decades public discontent with corn policies, which the public translates as anti-neoliberalism policies, has gradually grown. This thesis chronicles the growing discontent over corn policies and, more importantly, demonstrates how Mexican people have evolved to become agents for recentralizing corn in the country’s political, economic, and cultural discourses.
This thesis is dedicated to Precious Vida Yamaguchi and Sonya JoJo Caire for their overwhelming support and tolerating my anxiety I had throughout writing this thesis. This modest contribution to Latin American history is also dedicated to the people who are doing what they can to preserve *maíz criollo* and other treasured cultural artifacts from the threat of being lost due to economics and politics.
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The first person that deserves acknowledgement for the completion of this thesis is Dr. Amilcar Challú. His commitment to helping me take on this topic and patience in dealing with my shortcomings as a student cannot be overstated. I can only hope that this thesis serves as a respectable reflection of Dr. Challú’s excellence as a historian of Latin America, leader and mentor. Dr. Cabanillas should be acknowledged for his insightful ideas and suggestions. Dr. Archer must be acknowledged for not only being a member of my thesis committee even though Mexican history is far from her research interests, but because she taught me about the frameworks of international political economy, which was key to the completion of this project. Finally, I must acknowledge Bowling Green State University’s Department of History for their financial and academic support towards the completion of this thesis.
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INTRODUCTION

On March 18, 1938, Lázaro Cárdenas, the Mexican president at the time, expropriated Mexico’s oil industry. After much conflict, unsatisfactory negotiating with foreign oil companies, and threats of foreign intervention, Cárdenas expropriated the assets of nearly all the foreign oil companies operating in Mexico. Many Mexicans saw Cárdenas’ decision as a symbol of nationalistic pride. Josephus Daniels, the American ambassador to Mexico, recalled that in the aftermath of the celebration around the country because of the act that thousands of people marched on the Zócalo, the country’s most famous plaza, offering donations to compensate the oil companies for their expropriated assets. Describing the celebration, Daniels explained, “They took off wedding rings, bracelets, earrings, and put them, as it seemed to them, on a national altar…When night came crowds still waited to deposit their offerings, which comprised everything from gold and silver to animals and corn.”¹ The donations made it clear that people believed that a Mexico without transnational oil profits would survive. Mexicans’ donations also exemplified to the world that in Mexico, Sin maíz, no hay país (Without corn, there is no country).

Mexicans’ “corn for oil” gestures after the expropriation in 1938 exemplified the intimate connection between corn and Mexicans. Along with valuable metals and farm animals, corn was considered a unit valuable or worthy enough to be exchanged for perhaps Mexico’s most profitable natural resource. Symbolically, in exchange for the national state gaining economic independence, corn, the country’s most valued grain, was seen as a worthy “donation” to foreign companies for their losses. Throughout history, for millions of Mexicans corn has been regarded as more than a grain that was born in the country. It has been regarded as a religious deity,

commodity, symbol of life, representation for nationalistic pride, product for occupation, commodity, ingredient for food, and cultural emblem.

Corn, scientifically known as *Zea mays*, originated in Mexico. According to Nadal, a great part of the evolution that may be observed in terms of corn’s genetic variability took place in Mexico.\(^2\) Scenes of corn, and its diverse colors and sizes, can be traced back to pre-Columbian times in Mexico City.\(^3\) In the early twentieth-century, Emiliano Zapata, regarded as a member of Mexico’s pantheon of national heroes, is known for being the champion of the country’s *hombres de maíz* (the people of corn).\(^4\) In addition, the Mexican government, through propaganda and pseudo-scientific findings, tried to persuade Mexicans off their dietary reliance on corn for decades, going as far as saying that corn was a symbol of backwardness and hindrance to Mexican modernization from the 1890s to the 1940s. Nevertheless, by 1943, corn was found to have substantial nutritional value and its dietary importance to Mexicans was unquestioned.\(^5\) Anthropological studies published in the early-1990s explain how some indigenous groups, specifically the Nahuas, continued to regard corn as “the absolute necessity of life, the source of nourishment that takes precedence over all others [foods].”\(^6\) As will be measured and discussed, corn has remained a valuable part of Mexicans in a modern context. Furthermore, corn’s historical importance to national identity and dietary significance make it imperative that people can afford the grain.

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\(^5\) Pilcher 93-97.

The acquisition or the production of corn over recent decades, particularly over the last two decades, has become problematic. More specifically, corn has become more expensive on the global markets and urban consumers have had more difficulties purchasing tortillas, especially because tortillas are no longer subsidized by the government, which has led to large protests in cities. Corn subsidies aimed towards Mexican small agricultural producers have also been removed over recent decades, which has led to the competition from the U.S. to damaging local corn producers. These changes follow national policies in Mexico in which the state maintained very basic levels of protection for consumers and peasants. Both groups have taken issue at neoliberal policies behind their loss in welfare and organized resistance to them. Only recently, however, both urban and rural protest has converged, albeit briefly, in presenting a united block to revise neoliberal policies. In the midst of these protests, the groups are reiterating the belief that in Mexico there is no country without corn.

In urban centers around Mexico, tortilla prices today have become unavoidable and impossible to ignore. Protests numbering in the tens of thousands and other smaller expressions of discontent with tortilla prices have become common. As discussed in Chapter 1, wage-corrected tortilla prices over the last two decades have been the highest they have in nearly 50 years and citizens’ complaints seem accurate. Moreover, the rise in prices strongly correlates with Mexico’s decision to open or liberalize its economy and adopt neoliberal policies. Hence, high prices on a product that historically was protected through some form of trade protection and has been a regarded as a fundamental cultural food could be a reflection of adopting neoliberal policies, which conflates the tortilla and corn policies in Mexico with discussions concerning economics and politics. The extent to which corn and tortillas are related to larger and more abstract discussions is discussed at length in the first chapter.
While urban consumers have shown outright protests concerning the prices of tortillas, Mexico’s problems related to corn in its countryside go beyond anxieties over rising prices. As discussed at great length in Chapter 2, concerns related to corn in Mexico’s rural areas extend into arguments involving the environment, subsidies, fair prices, biodiversity, transnational companies, cultural traditions, livelihoods, rural entitlements, globalization and agriculture. Over the course of the last seven decades, changes in Mexico’s political and economic landscapes have had dramatic effects on the countryside and several problems correlated to corn have come about because of the changes. How these discourses developed and changed are fleshed out in the second chapter. Furthermore, Chapter 2, discusses the history of how corn became part of debates or conversations concerning the mentioned topics in rural areas.

Collectively, the complaints and grievances related to corn from urban and rural Mexico have by chance formed the country’s current “corn conflict.” The third chapter of this thesis concerns how the corn controversy evolved and developed. Using available sources, Chapter 3 chronicles how the disagreements with government policies related to corn started in the countryside by quite small groups of farmers and turned into much larger and diverse. Mexico’s corn controversy has become large enough that scenes of hundreds and thousands of protestors marched in the Zócalo or other parts of the country over a number of matters related to corn. Insight into who these protestors are, their demands and methods, and significance are all fleshed out in the final chapter. Moreover, this chapter explains how effective or ineffective the protests have been and draws other conclusions about the problems related to corn.

Throughout Mexican history, corn, similar to other foods in other countries and cultures, has been considered an afterthought or commonplace. The regards for corn have magnified and have been vocalized loudly over recent decades, however. Economic and political policies
related to corn in Mexico today are at the center of national and local controversies. Together, the different tensions involving corn form what should be considered a changing of the significance of a fundamental part of Mexico’s history.
CHAPTER I. CORN IN THE CITIES: ACCESS TO TORTILLAS IN MEXICO CITY, 1940-2008

The popular public protest by many Mexicans concerning access to affordable and native-grown corn, while quite noticeable in very recent years, has a history. Public demonstrations, such as the march on the Zócalo, Mexico City’s historical plaza, aimed at alleviating high corn prices are not entirely newfound concepts. This is because the country has dealt with high corn prices and subsequent public outcry several times before Mexico adopted neoliberal economic policies after 1982 and joined the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) in 1994. However, recent popular protests in Mexico concerning the price of tortillas, the most consumed byproduct of corn, and corn prices have had strong anti-free trade and anti-liberalism themes. Another common theme in the protests has been the appeals that people have made are aimed towards the Mexican government to provide some relief to curtail what they believe to be a proliferation of prices because of macroeconomic policies. The protests and appeals, moreover, have been large enough that they have received national and international media attention.

While there has been significant scholarship pertaining to corn prices and popular unrest in Mexico, works truly testing an “average” Mexican’s ability to access corn or tortillas have been few. The prices of tortillas and corn could indeed have increased for many Mexicans and their protests could be justified. On the other hand, when historical prices and wages are examined, the idea that prices are rising could be debunked and thereby diminish the validity of the protests. With these possibilities in mind, a form of measuring the historical affordability and access to corn is appropriate. More specifically, a historical measure of how much corn a

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7 Greenpeace Mexico, "Velada por el maíz," [video], Youtube.com, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0qV6kQ_CI10.
rank-and-file Mexican can afford becomes ideal research to investigate whether recent protests were viable or unfounded.

Research about corn prices and popular access to corn also leads to political and economic examinations of the protests in Mexico. If prices are rising and rising for only certain populations, and is this rise felt by some groups more than others, then one must question which groups are being protected (or not protected) from rising prices. Conversely, if prices have not been rising when compared to the past, then the question of why the protests persist should be addressed. Could the protests be masking changes in Mexico’s political landscape that have made the protests possible? Or, could the protests over high prices really be attributed to changes in the country’s macroeconomic policies, neoliberalism, free trade, and other themes heard involved in the recent unrest? Examining and analyzing political trends in Mexico, particularly after the 1980s and 1990s, when huge economic and political changes occurred, could answer important questions and reveal more about the frequent and popular unrest.

Affordability of Tortillas in Mexico

Being able to afford corn, however, involves a number of factors. There are the wages that a person earns. In addition, there are prices for a product, in this case, tortillas and corn. Also, there are real wages, which are wages divided by a price index. Price indices are generated using a consumer basket of goods, which, for Mexicans, corn has always had a prominent place within. Real wages allow for relatively accurate measurements of changes in purchasing power. As Jeffrey Bortz and Marcos Aguila point out, wages, particularly real wages, have played an important role in Mexican history. Real wages played such an important role in the country’s history that the social upheaval of Mexico’s revolution, between 1910-1921, “convinced many
Mexicans that there was a wage problem and that it needed to be understood and dealt with.\textsuperscript{8} The problem was, indeed, responded to. Evidence of the government’s concern over wages was clear with the inclusion of a mandated minimum wage in the country’s 1917 constitution. Moreover, since 1929, with the Dirección General de Estadística (General Director of Statistics) and the Banco de México (Bank of Mexico), the Mexican government has made efforts to publish systematic price indexes and study wages throughout the country.\textsuperscript{9} In other words, throughout the twentieth-century the Mexican government has considered the regulation of wages and prices of basic products priorities involving in governing.

An appropriate method to determine Mexicans’ ability to afford corn is to examine corn prices and peoples’ wages over a significant period of years. More specifically, prices of corn’s largest derivative, tortillas, should be examined with manufacturing wages. For urban Mexicans the prices of tortillas represent the price of corn, because they are the largest and most consumed product of corn. During a given period, if wages grow while prices fall or remain stagnant, then it can be inferred that the ability to afford tortillas improved. Or, if wages fall while prices also fall, then it can again be assumed that tortillas remained as affordable as before. In short, by deflating tortilla prices by wages I understand that affordability changes as a function of income and price. This scenario of wages and prices varying and following different patterns, and thus changing the ability to afford tortillas, has been what has happened to Mexican consumers from 1940 to 2007.

Sources

\textsuperscript{9} Ibid. 121-122.
An index of wage-corrected tortilla prices showing Mexicans’ purchasing power of the product from 1940 to 2008 was constructed from reliable Mexican sources. *Estadísticas Históricas de México* (Historical Statistics of Mexico), a publication of historical statistics made by the *Instituto Nacional de Estadísticas, Geografía e Informatica* (INEGI; National Institute of Statistics, Geography and Informatics) and dependent of the Mexican government, has been widely used as a source for statistics concerning population, prices, employment, and a number of other topics. INEGI also maintains online databases that have statistical data extending up to very recent years concerning many of the same topics mentioned. The Banco de México has been compiling material, such as consumer prices indices, nominal prices and wages, since 1929 and is the most authoritative source concerning prices indexes in Mexico. Both sources are respected and widely used, even if not perfect.

Mexico City, which is the capital of Mexico, was selected as the location where statistics were collected for important reasons. Important scholarship has been dedicated to prove Mexico City’s political and economic primacy over the whole of the country. Between 1900 and 1940 Mexican cities grew at immense rates. Mexico City was the city that grew the most. By 1980, Mexico City was one of the most populated cities in the world with a population estimated between fourteen and sixteen million people.10 Maria Castillo also attested to the fact that Mexico City, during the heart of the twentieth-century, “consolidated its role as the primary city-region in Mexico.”11 Diane Davis’ *Urban Leviathan* was dedicated entirely to demonstrating Mexico City’s disproportional influence on national politics and the country’s development.

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before and especially after 1910. The availability of data and the simplicity of the data also justified selecting the capital for examining wage-corrected tortilla prices. Moreover, prices and wages in Mexico City have historically been correlated to other large cities in the country.

There were several sets of published wages and earnings utilized to create the indexes. *Estadísticas* provided weekly manufacturing wages in Mexico for different years from 1940 to 1985. An online version of the *Estadísticas* provided average household incomes and median family incomes in Mexico for several years between the years 1963 and 1992. In addition, median household wages were collected from the United Nations University’s World Institute for Development Economics Research, during available years after 1992. Finally, other sets of wages used were average manufacturing wages, in Mexico City, provided by Banco de México between 1968 and 2008. Collectively, manufacturing wages and household earnings were used because they were well correlated to other measures of income. Moreover, the wages and earnings represented what could be considered popular incomes over the given period in the country’s most influential region.

The different sets of wages were used to show the evolution of what can be considered popular wages in Mexico. As seen in Figure 1, the historical trends of each of the two sets of manufacturing wages followed the same pattern, which was moderate increases between 1940

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and the mid to late-1960s, and large growth thereafter. Manufacturing wages, more importantly, had close correlations to the national median household incomes and average family incomes during the available years. In fact, the household and family incomes almost directly followed the same trajectories of manufacturing wages. In addition, the Mexico City manufacturing wages (labeled Manufacturing Wages) were quite close to the national manufacturing wages and other datasets, which justified their use as being representative of national incomes.

Figure 1 Index of Popular Wages in Mexico, 1940-2008 (1984=100)

Sources. See text.
Note. Wages measured in pesos per day.

The historical prices of tortillas were gathered from Estadísticas Históricas and Banco de México. Nominal tortilla prices, in Mexico City, from Estadísticas for the period between 1940 and 1979 were compiled.\textsuperscript{17} An online archive of monthly consumer prices indices maintained by Banco provided monthly tortilla prices, also from Mexico City, from 1969 to 2008.\textsuperscript{18} Drawing on prices from two different sources created the problem that a reliable history of prices could not be constructed. This problem being that each source had scales different from one another


and could not be compared. However, the two sets of prices were appropriately compared and scaled using common years.\textsuperscript{19} Hence, a continuous evolution of tortilla prices, from 1940 to 2008, was put together.

The potential problem of using Mexico City tortilla prices as representative national prices was taken into account and resolved. A national average of tortilla prices was constructed using the average price of tortillas in four large urban areas (Guadalajara, Monterrey, Puebla, Ciudad Juarez) in the country by using Banco de México’s national index of consumer prices. Banco’s available indexes allowed prices to be compared between Mexico City and the national average prices from 1979 to 2008.\textsuperscript{20} The fact that Mexico City’s prices were closely related to the average of the other four large urban centers justified the use of tortilla prices from the capital as proxies for national prices. Tortilla prices before 1979 would have been an ideal way of measuring the evolution of tortilla prices, but the sources available did not allow this option. In part, this was because all four urban centers used to generate national average prices only had prices after 1979 available, and were inconsistent and not continuous prior to this year. In any case, the data from 1979 to 2008 showed a strong correlation.

Figure 2 Wage-Corrected Tortilla Prices Index for Mexico City and National Urban Centers (2002=100)

\textsuperscript{19} Both sources had price listings between 1969 and 1979. Between these years, the rate of growth for Estadísticas Históricas price listings was 245 percent. The rate of growth for Banco de México price listings during the same period was 400 percent. The discrepancy can be attributed to a rounding problem in the initial years of the Banco de México series.

\textsuperscript{20} Banco de México. “Índices de Precios al Consumidor [Consumer Price Indices], por ciudad [each individual city was selected], tortillas y derivados del maíz y maíz [tortillas and corn derivatives and corn],” http://www.banxico.org.mx/polmoneinflacion/estadisticas/indicesPrecios/indicesPreciosConsumidor.html.

Sources. See text.
Notes. Prices measured in pesos per kilogram.

Using the series of tortilla prices and wages, a final index showing wage-adjusted tortilla prices was constructed. Essentially, wage-adjusted prices of a product are nominal or “off the shelf” prices that a consumer pays divided by wages. Wage-adjusted or -corrected prices measure just how expensive (or inexpensive) a product has been because the actual prices that consumers pay are offset by how much a person earns. In Figure 3, wage-corrected tortilla prices, using daily manufacturing wages as representative of popular Mexican incomes, between 1940 and 2008 are presented. In essence, the graph shows a historical index or comparison of how many kilograms of tortillas a working Mexican in Mexico City could afford with a day’s worth of work in the manufacturing sector between 1940 and 2008.

Figure 3 Wage-Corrected Tortilla Prices Index, 1940-2008 (1940=100)
Trends in the Affordability of Tortillas

Simply looking at wage-corrected tortilla prices in Mexico City from 1940 to 2008 certainly cannot be the absolute final determinant that explains the access to the most important food product in Mexico. However, the index in the country’s most important city does provide significant aid in measuring Mexicans’ access to corn in urban locations. The index also shows the historical trends of tortillas prices, which corroborates scholarship suggesting that political regimes in Mexico had an active role in ensuring food security as a means of establishing and maintaining their political legitimacy. In addition, the index gives a representation of how the ability to afford tortillas has been connected to Mexico’s economic decisions. Moreover, the index clearly demonstrates that tortilla prices experienced three periods of change from 1940 to 2008.

The index presents what looks to be important long-term variations in tortilla prices. Starting in 1940 prices experienced large decreases until the 1970s. More specifically, prices decreased from an index level of 100 to just below 30, a substantial decrease in prices. Thereafter prices tended to remain within a relatively consistent range, with the exception of some years in the mid-1970s and 1980s, until a new trend started after 1994. After 1994, prices continuously increased, albeit with the exception of some years after 2000. It should also be noted that after 2006 prices were at levels that Mexican consumers had not seen since the late-1950s. More importantly, prices after 1994 were characterized by steady increase with little to no interruptions, which could suggest that future prices will continue to increase. These three periods of intense decreases, relative stability and gradual escalation in prices lend themselves
well to dividing them into three periods. Comparing these three periods of tortilla prices with scholarship concerning political and economic discourses in Mexico during the given periods truly helps explain these trends.

Access to Tortillas, 1940-1972

During the first period (1940-1972), Mexico City’s population experienced dramatic decreases in the price of tortillas. Essentially, in less than two decades the nominal price (the price of corn in stores or “off the shelf”) increased almost five times. These increases coincided, however, with meaningful increases in wages, which brought down wage-corrected tortilla prices. To simply attribute the growth in prices during this period to market relationships and/or increases of manufacturing wages in Mexico’s Federal District would be incorrect. There were extremely significant political realities and economic dynamics behind what happened to prices over the period.

The political and economic context of Mexico during this period begins with the end of Cardenismo. Essentially, Cardenismo was the label attached to the political and economic policies of president Lázaro Cárdenas (1934-1940). In 1934, when Cárdenas took office, Mexico had lived in relative political and social stability for a little over a decade since the end of its bloody revolution in 1921. After the presidencies of Álvaro Obregón and Plutarco Calles basically failed to live up to the social and political values of the Mexican revolution, which included land reform, supporting the peasant masses and incorporating the peasants into the national political fold, Mexico was ripe for Cardenismo. However, being a champion of the people during this time meant catering to the rural masses, which were the majority of the Mexican population, by embodying revolutionary ideals.
Cárdenas won Mexico’s presidency through the political coalitions he formed with the labor groups and at the time what was a newly formed constituency: campesinos. Christopher Boyer’s, Becoming Campesinos, chronicled how the rural masses and agraristas of Mexico gained a “political voice” and “privileged position within the post-revolutionary nation” via Cárdenas’ catering.\textsuperscript{21} In return for political support provided by the campesinos, Cárdenas carried out massive land reform for rural groups. He did this via the newly created ejido system (communal lands for cultivation), increased state spending to build infrastructure for the countryside, and created Mexico’s first State Food Agency (SFA).\textsuperscript{22} What was important about Cardenismo was that future regimes would have to deal with corporate political ties to the masses of the country. These ties, moreover, involved heavy state intervention in economic markets, including corn and tortilla prices.

Inflation in Mexico’s burgeoning urban centers (the population in Mexico City grew by more than thirty percent in the 1930s) soared during the Cardenas’ term.\textsuperscript{23} This inflation drove up the price of basic foods, such as corn, in cities and coincided with an increase of thirty-two percent in daily minimum wages in urban areas, but, more importantly, a fifty-seven percent increase in the cost of living. These circumstances led to protests by Cardenas’ urban labor supporters, the Confederación de Trabajadores Mexicanos (CTM; Confederation of Mexican Workers).\textsuperscript{24} To ease the price of corn and other foods for urban groups the Mexican government began purchasing grains from the countryside, which helped alleviate the problems in the

\textsuperscript{22} Enrique C. Ochoa, Feeding Mexico: The Political Uses of Food since 1910 (Wilmington, Delaware: Scholarly Resources Inc., 2000), 39.
\textsuperscript{23} Davis 329.
\textsuperscript{24} Ochoa 46.
cities. Essentially, in Mexico City, the government solidified a pattern of appeasing urban constituents represented by organizations incorporated to the ruling party, such as the CTM, with cheap prices for foods instead of helping wages keep pace with inflation. These prices, created via significant market manipulation and stopgap measures, which Enrique Ochoa calls “ad hoc and unsystematic,” would set the precedent for future ill-planned political strategies and poor economic interventions in food markets that brought down the price of food products.

After 1940, Mexico’s embrace of the ISI (import substitution industrialization) development model entailed, among other policies, more intervention in grain markets. In attempts to stimulate the domestic market, discourage targeted imports, and enhance the country’s agricultural efficiency, the Mexican government allowed the Rockefeller Foundation and Mexican agronomists to introduce hybrid seed varieties, modern techniques and farm machinery to the country. At the time, however, Mexico’s “Green Revolution” could not withstand wartime inflation, particularly in 1942 and 1943, and poor harvests. Also during this time, according to Bortz, workers cost of living in Mexico City had more than tripled. In addition, the average real industrial wage in the city had declined from 25.73 pesos a week in 1940, to 14.15 pesos in 1946. Kevin Middlebrook also made the point that real minimum wages fell sharply before and immediately after World War II, which highlighted a loss of purchasing power in Mexico City. In 1943, this inflation, coupled with poor corn harvests, created riots in the capital, which compelled President Manuel Ávila Camacho to intervene in

25 Ibid. 47.
26 Ibid. 64.
28 Ochoa 77.
grain markets. An expansion of the network of government food outlets in Mexico City and effectively manipulating the prices of basic foodstuffs brought food prices down and calmed popular unrest.\textsuperscript{30}

Figure 4 Federal District daily manufacturing wages and tortilla prices, 1940-1972.

Source. \textit{Estadísticas Históricas de México} and Banco de México.
Notes. Wages measured in pesos. Tortilla prices measured in pesos per kilogram.

More importantly, what became very clear again during the period immediately before and after World War II was the fact that the Mexican government was keen to get involved in market spaces to curtail public discontent over corn prices. The \textit{Partido Revolucionario Institucional} (PRI), Mexico’s presidential regime from the 1940s to 2000, displayed a vested interest in keeping their favored urban, middle-class worker constituency at bay. Essentially, Camacho and the PRI did what they had to in order to maintain a semblance of order and quell protests. The ways in which the state’s actions to appease its privileged constituents can be seen in Figure 4, which shows that while tortilla prices were increasing, wages also increased and kept a relative pace. Mexico’s regime ensured urban residents that while tortilla prices were increasing, wages, specifically manufacturing wages, kept growing, thus bringing prices down. Although the actions were politically motivated and aimed at helping only certain populations,

\textsuperscript{30} Ochoa 80.
the state still displayed a pattern of supplying cheap food prices to its privileged constituents. In other words, maintaining affordable prices of Mexico’s most important food staple helped sustaining the legitimacy of the ruling regime.

By the 1950s, the state’s pattern of doing what was necessary to please their urban constituents continued despite some setbacks. In an attempt to stimulate Mexico out of a lingering recession after World War II, the peso was devalued by over one hundred percent between June 1948 and June 1949. In addition, poor harvests in 1950-1951 created more inflation for urban workers. Consumer prices in cities began to rise, too, and urban workers began demanding higher wages. According to Bortz’s index of consumer cost of living in Mexico City, the cost of living in 1946 was 305.67 pesos and by 1952 the figure was at 607, while wages barely showed increases. These conditions were present during a time when a Mexicans’ average per capita corn consumption was more than ten ounces per day; this fact only complicated the PRI’s position to deliver social provisions to its citizenry. The PRI’s response, as Ochoa said, was to “Once again, in the process of rolling back the social promises of the revolution, food subsides were offered as a substitute for [an] improved standard of living.” In essence, the state expanded its presence in food markets and managed to manipulate prices enough that wages were able to continue keeping pace with tortilla prices.

Mexico’s economy, as a whole, grew between the 1950s and into the early 1970s. The country’s gross domestic product (GDP) had doubled between 1940 and 1952, with much of the

31 Ibid. 112.
33 Ochoa 113.
growth attributable to urban-led industrialization.\textsuperscript{34} As seen in Figure 4, urban wages displayed substantial growth and, to a degree, outpaced growths in tortilla prices. Urbanization created conflict between city groups and rural groups who migrated to the city, but these situations were handled by the state through an expansion of the SFA and guaranteed cheap food prices from the mid to late-1960s.\textsuperscript{35} The economy’s growth allowed President Adolfo Ruiz Cortines to supply more than 700 \textit{molinos de nixtamal} (corn mills) with enough subsidized corn to produce more than a million kilograms of tortillas per day during the middle to late-1950s.\textsuperscript{36} Furthermore, between 1965 and 1969, the state’s network of SFA grain storage units nearly tripled.\textsuperscript{37} More importantly, the PRI’s troubles were handled and the overall growth of Mexico’s economy was sustained.

By the early-1970s, however, the period of decreasing wage-corrected tortilla prices ended. In part, this was due to urban middle-class demand for meat products that motivated large commercial farmers began a focus on cultivating corn for fodder. With this in mind, the Mexican government increased its efforts to help large-scale capital based agricultural production by offering larger subsides to larger producers, and access to products such as fertilizers and seed. This choice shifted motivation for corn farmers to reduce the amount of production dedicated towards tortilla consumers. Prices also stopped falling because wages stagnated to an extent during the early 1970s. By 1971, only a year removed from achieving self-sufficiency in food security, and despite national economic growth, Mexico began importing

\textsuperscript{34} Ibid. 127.
\textsuperscript{35} Davis 132.
\textsuperscript{36} Ochoa 144.
\textsuperscript{37} Ibid. 169.
corn from the United States. Furthermore, after 1972, tortilla prices did not continue to decrease much further and ended what had been a period of continually decreasing prices.

Access to Tortillas, 1973-1994
The second period of wage-corrected tortilla prices was largely characterized by long-term stability but volatility in the short run. Patterns of manufacturing wages and tortilla prices quite mirrored one another (Figure 5). Moreover, with the exception of the 1973 global oil crisis and the country’s economic crisis in the mid-1980s, prices remained within a certain index level of 20-30 (Figure 3). Prices even fell below to their lowest levels throughout the entire period mentioned (1940-2008) in the early-1990s. This was primarily done through even larger increases in the size and purview of the SFA, which meant a larger state presence in economic sectors, and what could have been called a smooth transition to a neoliberal economic model. This period, furthermore, highlighted the PRI’s policy of supplying food security in order to maintain the appearance of political legitimacy in the eyes of its major constituents, and the beginnings of political unrest around the country.

Figure 5 Federal District daily manufacturing wages and tortilla prices, 1973-1994.

Source. Estadísticas Históricas de México and Banco de México.
Notes. Wages measured in pesos. Tortilla prices measured in pesos per kilogram.

Evidence of the PRI’s political troubles was seen as early as the late-1960s. Many people dissatisfied with what they felt was a poor and inefficient government, and even repressive, responded with public protests and other forms of demonstration. Many youths throughout the country, along with residents of the country’s rural areas, felt marginalized by the regime and questioned the democratic policies of the PRI. In response to the backlashes against the regime, which included the Tlatelolco Massacre of 1968 and rural guerilla activities, PRI presidents Luis Echeverría Álvarez (1970-1976) and José López Portillo (1976-1982) made further efforts to quell public discontent. Both presidents also made expansions of the SFA, and its operational subsidiaries to unprecedented heights between 1970 and 1982, as pillars for quelling popular displeasure for the government.39

Echeverría and López Portillo both dealt with inflation through expanding the social welfare role of the SFA and further entrenching the Mexican state in economic sectors, particularly the basic foodstuffs sector. Echeverria started his history of social provisioning by creating more than half a dozen state subsidiaries of the SFA, called CONASUPO [Compañía Nacional de Subsistencias Populares [National Company of Popular Subsistence]) by the 1970s, which included LICONSA (Leche Industrializado [Industrialized Dairies]) and MACONSA (Maíz Industrializado [Industrialized Corn]). Each agency was designed to alleviate some of the affects of global and national inflation through government-sponsored corn milling operations, milk recombination plans and wheat flouring plants. Echeverría also created other state-

39 Ochoa 177.
dependent subsidiaries of CONASUPO that even processed cheap foods, such as crackers and pasta, for urban populations.\textsuperscript{40}

The beginning of the López Portillo presidency was met with a slumping economy, which left many citizens uneasy with the PRI. Mexico’s petroleum boom, however, allowed López Portillo to expanded the CONASUPO and further entrench the state in economic sectors in order to calm citizens’ unrest. López Portillo to expanded the CONASUPO and tried to help Mexico’s rural agricultural providers run more efficiently and supply urban residents more effectively, through state-sponsored companies like the SAM (\textit{Sistema Alimentaria Mexicana} [Mexican Alimentary System]).\textsuperscript{41} To further help sustain the city-based corn flour and tortilla industries, the government went as far as purchasing imported unnecessary amounts of corn from the international market at prices above market levels.\textsuperscript{42} This action sufficed at the time and for at least a decade thereafter, however.

As Figure 5 shows, after 1972 tortilla prices grew during nearly each of the years, but the period was generally characterized by proportional increases in wages. Much of this was attributed to the fact that state entities, such as MACONSA, actually were competitors in the tortilla distribution and production process. In essence, the state was able to effectively keep the consumer price of tortillas, and thereby corn, down by funding its own subsidiary within the tortilla industry. As a whole, Mexico’s economy was still performing relatively well and wages, particularly urban wages, outpaced the increases in tortilla prices. In large part, this was because of more oil deposits discovered in the country and the foreign loans easily extended from the “petro-dollars.” With the exception of some years during the mid-1970s, because of the first

\textsuperscript{40} Ibid. 182-184.
\textsuperscript{41} Ibid. 188.
\textsuperscript{42} Appendini 67.
major oil crisis in 1973, the actions that Echeverría, López Portillo, and the government took during the 1970s and much of the 1980s, combined with a growing economy, kept prices down.

Drops in the international price of oil, in 1981 and 1982, were the triggers of a financial crisis in Mexico that hurt the state’s ability to continue its poorly managed social spending. Mexico’s huge reliance on oil exports, which Nora Lustig says accounted for more than 70 percent of the country’s exports, and macroeconomic mismanagement, launched the country’s economy into dramatic contraction. By 1982, Mexico could no longer rely on the prospects of its profitable oil industry and was compelled to default on its foreign loans. The Mexican government, however, continued to help urban workers by guaranteeing low corn prices in their efforts to maintain social and political stability amid the economic chaos. Inflation soared after the onset of the crisis and by the middle of the 1980s, President Miguel de la Madrid (1982-1988) realized that dismantling the entire structure of CONASUPO and an overall reduction of state spending were necessary to keep Mexico’s economy somewhat afloat.

Mexico’s 1982 debt crisis did not immediately affect tortilla prices. It was not until after 1985 when prices began meaningfully growing, but the state managed to bring prices down not long thereafter. This gradual growth in prices occurred because the Mexican government exercised a gradual dismantling of its companies and subsidiaries in food markets and an overall measured reduction in the state’s involvement in economic sectors. As Ochoa explained, “Because of its [CONASUPO’s] unique role as a catch-all social welfare agency, it did not undergo massive restructuring during the early years of the crisis.”

Structural adjustments recommendations from the International Monetary Fund (IMF) to stabilize the country’s

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44 Ochoa 207.
economy were followed, however. By the end of the crisis, Mexico adopted neoliberal economic policies and revised its policies concerning food security. The fact that the state’s reduced presence from economic sectors was deliberately gradual, with some spikes, in wage-corrected tortilla prices can be seen in Figure 3.

Immediately following the country’s economic problems, the PRI had to make adjustments to save the Mexican economy, even at the expense of alienating their traditional political coalitions with urban middle class constituents. De La Madrid began eliminating several subsidies and price supports, and privatizing government-owned operations, which did not please many constituents. The state also made other unpopular gestures to liberalize the country’s economy, an example being Mexico joining the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) in 1986. The De La Madrid administration also sponsored reductions in the guaranteed prices of corn, which the state’s previous policies had protected Mexican growers from. Although protests did occur in the countryside, because of the state’s decision to buy cheaper corn from international markets, the PRI’s political legitimacy in Mexican cities was somewhat secure by its continuance of providing relatively cheap foods to urban constituents. By the 1980s, however, it was clear that although tortilla prices were somewhat protected in cities, there was a growing dissatisfaction with the PRI’s history of poor governance and the economy’s shift towards neoliberal policies.

This growing discontent amongst Mexicans against the PRI sewed the seeds for what would become dramatic political change in the near future. As Haber et al. described, starting in 1982, when the President Lopez Portillo expropriated the country’s banking industry, the PRI

46 Ochoa 207.
was gradually losing much of its traditional political alliances with Mexico’s business class.\textsuperscript{47} The party’s late and mismanaged response to the massive earthquake that hit Mexico City in 1985 also helped generate urban distaste for the regime and mobilize certain sectors of civic society. Civic groups, such as \textit{Asemblea de Barrios} (Assembly of Neighborhoods), came about to help people in Mexico City, who were left homeless, with little government aid, after the earthquake.\textsuperscript{48} Furthermore, in response to electoral fraud at the municipal and state levels during 1985 and 1986, helped mobilize groups, such as the Mexican Academy of Human Rights, to oversee future elections and demand more transparency in governmental actions.\textsuperscript{49} In Chihuahua, the Roman Catholic Church, which historically had a relatively tenuous relationship with the PRI, began to openly show support for the their largest opposition, the \textit{Partido Acción Nacional} (hereafter PAN; National Action Party), because of electoral fraud during the late-1980s.\textsuperscript{50} Miscalculated responses to economic crises, mismanagement of natural disasters and electoral wrongdoings, collectively birthed a mounting distrust of the PRI from its historically aligned coalitions that even a history of cheap foods could not appease.

In 1988, Carlos Salinas de Gotari was elected president in a tight and arguably fraudulent election, which only highlighted a growing the public’s favor of the PRI. However, the shift towards neoliberalism and what Salinas de Gotari called modernization did not slow. In 1989 Salinas liberalized many restrictions on foreign direct investment in Mexico as an attempt to invite foreign investors to the country.\textsuperscript{51} As another symbol of government deregulation and neoliberal policies, Salinas reformed Article 27 of the Mexican constitution and allowed the

\textsuperscript{47} Haber et al. 129-130.
\textsuperscript{49} Haber et al. 144.
\textsuperscript{50} Ibid. 143.
\textsuperscript{51} Ibid. 73.
privatization of ejidos after 1992.\textsuperscript{52} This action symbolized the end of decades of government sponsored, although inconsistently enforced, land reform, which also was a symbol of an abandonment of one of the country’s major revolutionary ideals.

Before the end of the same year, President Salinas began what became the complete dismantling of the SFA, and liquidating many of its subsidiaries, and created a new social welfare arm of the state with a deliberately smaller role in economic, particularly agricultural, sectors. PRONASOL (Programa Nacional de Solidaridad [National Solidarity Program]), the state’s new agency began eliminating price subsidies and instead gave the product away to 3.2 million families who earned less than minimum wages.\textsuperscript{53} This was obviously an effective effort to rid the government of indiscriminate social provisioning by helping the groups that needed the most help, which fell in-line with his “social liberalism” doctrine. Efforts such as these, however, also removed the state from a long-term role of being the provider of expected help to corn producers and tortilla companies. While attempts to ease the transition into new economic models were made and the country’s poorest people were provided with state aid, the PRI’s traditional privileged constituents in urban centers were largely ignored.

For the tortilla industry, the moves towards a more open economy and privatization of many of the SFA subsidiaries became a greater concentration of the tortilla milling industry, in a single company’s control. During the Salinas administration, in what was regarded as a corrupt business deal, all subsidized corn sales from the state’s distribution agency were shifted to the Maseca-Gruma company, which was owned by long-time Salinas’s family friend Roberto Gonzalez Barrera (Gonzalez would later provide Salinas with a private jet to flee Mexico after his brother, Raul, was indicted for murder). Consequently, small nixtamaleros (old-fashioned

\textsuperscript{52} Castillo 1.
\textsuperscript{53} Ochoa 212.
tortilla millers or makers) were forced to purchase corn at market prices while Maseca was
privileged to buy its corn at lower subsidized prices. With the deal, Barrera, known as the “King
of the Tortilla,” acquired 52 percent of Mexico’s national tortilla market and a disproportionate
amount of influence on tortilla prices. The deal, however, was a symbol of the large economic
shifts that the country was experiencing during the first half of the 1990s.

During the early-1990s, Mexico’s economy and its people continued their transition. By
1991, more limitations on foreign investment in the country had been reformed as an attempt to
further open the economy. State-owned enterprises, such as steel plants, airlines, and telephone
monopoly, were privatized during by the 1990s. In 1994, in further attempts to entrench the
country’s economy in global capitalism and neoliberal aligned policies, Mexico signed the
NAFTA with Canada and the United States. Between 1992 and early 1993, Mexico negotiated
the agreement with its North American partners. One of the sticking points during the
negotiations was the inclusion of corn in the agreement. While the U.S. wanted to export their
corn, which was up to 40 percent cheaper to produce and coming from a place where that had
key comparative and competitive advantages, such as good land, know-how, capital, and
government-sponsored subsidies. They also were concerned about subjecting corn producers in
Mexico to compete with subsidized farmers from the U.S., who produced corn more efficiently
and on larger scales. The NAFTA did, in fact, include corn in the treaty (the U.S. would not
have passed the it otherwise), which meant imports of cheaper corn. At the same time, however,
a single tortilla company, MASECA, expanded its control of the tortilla market and potentially
eroded the ability to translate the savings from cheaper corn to the public.

55 Haber et al. 73-74.
Access to Tortillas, 1995-2008

The final period of wage-corrected tortilla prices was characterized by steady and consistent increases, as Figure 3 shows. However, it should be noted that these increases were not historically exceptional. In fact, 2008 levels were seen throughout the 1940s and years in the 1950s. Gradual increases in prices could be attributed to Mexico’s further entrenchment in neoliberal economic policies, participation in free trade agreements, and political changes throughout the period. Wages did grow throughout the period, but tortilla prices outpaced the increases. Consequently, the gap between prices and wages increasingly expanded after 2000 (Figure 6). In essence, workers earning a manufacturing wage were able to afford less and less tortillas, which, particularly for urban residents, are how they judge the price of corn. Moreover, tortilla prices rose higher than 1973 oil crisis levels, and the trend in prices occurred for more than a decade with prospects for consumer relief appearing bleak.

Figure 6 National daily manufacturing wages and Mexico City tortilla prices, 1995-2008

Sources. Banco de México.
Notes. Wages measured in pesos per day. Tortilla prices measured in pesos per kilogram.

Mexican economist Alejandro Nadal explains, the inclusion corn in the NAFTA was the product of a “shortsighted approach,” particularly because of what it would do to Mexicans.56

While cheaper corn would theoretically be more available to consumers, the inclusion of corn in the agreement would also potentially put Mexican consumers at the mercy of global prices of corn, which could increase to levels unheard of in Mexico. As Figure 3 shows, prices started a gradual but steady climb after 1994, when the agreement was ratified. It should also be noted that prices did not immediately skyrocket after the adoption of the NAFTA.

More detrimental for urban Mexican consumers was the complete removal of tortilla subsidies for consumers in 1998, by President Ernesto Zedillo. This decision was done at a time when, according to studies at Mexico’s National Nutrition Institute, thirteen million children received 80 percent of their caloric intake from tortillas. The prices of corn and tortillas rose substantially, with the price of corn increasing 127 percent from 1997 to 1999 and another 22 percent from 2000 to 2002. Determining how much these increases were related to international prices, or market conditions in the tortilla industry, or the abolishment of subsidies, would be a worthwhile examination. What mattered, however, was that prices increased quite notably and consumers showed angst in reaction to the proliferation of prices. Later, according to Appendini, the prices grew more than 75 percent between 2006 and 2007. Mexico’s post-NAFTA corn situation has also stemmed into affecting the country’s farmers, with many corn farmers losing motivations to continue their occupations, and instead move to urban centers and migrate to the U.S. for employment. Mexico’s participation in the NAFTA and the

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57 Ross 35.
59 Appendini 67-69.
government’s advances in liberalizing the country’s economy have been part of what has been called a “sloppy” process.\textsuperscript{60}

Mexico’s decision to participate in a large free trade agreement and abandon its historical subsidies for corn were grounded in fiscal responsibilities and, more importantly, politics. According to Roy Boyd and Khosrow Doroodian, Mexico’s decisions to remove many of the subsidies, particularly for corn, would be “relatively painless.” Both Boyd and Doroodian also said that while Mexican consumers would initially not be better off with the dropping of the subsidies, the state’s increase in income could be “targeted to displaced workers as well as the working poor who face inflationary pressures due to rising food costs.”\textsuperscript{61} This logic, however, became problematic when prices of corn derivatives, specifically tortillas, consequently grew, and the state did not find effective methods for managing their newfound resources to curtail rising prices. As mentioned, politics were also involved in the decision to include corn in the NAFTA. The U.S. demanded that corn be included as one of the products that would be scheduled to become freely traded, without this provision, the deal potentially would have not been completed. So, in Mexico’s attempt to secure a large economic trade agreement with its economically powerful neighbor, politics were the more important factor for corn being included in the deal, along with fiscal considerations.

Efforts to relieve consumers from growing prices were made during this last period, though. As mentioned, President Salinas subsidized, more specifically distributed, tortillas for many targeted groups around the country. Also, in 1999, when President Ernesto Zedillo (2000-

\textsuperscript{60} Fernando Barceinas and Antonio Yunez Naude, “Efectos de la desaparición de la CONASUPO en el comercio y en los precios de los cultivos básicos,” Estudios Económicos, El Colegio de México, Centro de Estudios Económicos, volume 15, number 2 (2000), 223.
ended the government’s twenty-five year period of tortilla subsidies, the government signed agreements with tortilla companies to avoid price gouging and price ceilings. Later, in 2007, newly elected President Felipe Calderón made efforts to stabilize tortilla prices by signing the *Acuerdo para Estabilizar el Precios de la Tortilla* [Agreement to Stabilize the Price of Tortillas] as a response to consumer demands. At the signing of the agreement Calderón said that the pact was made to “protect the pockets of Mexican families.” Despite the state efforts to help consumers, though, Mexicans continued to see prices rise. Furthermore, prices increased during a time in which the regimes were reluctant to involve themselves in markets and the PRI no longer had the power to intervene in economic sectors to appease its privileged constituents.

Mexican consumers’ difficulties also were compounded with the fact corn became a freely traded commodity, in accordance with the gradual 14-year phasing out of tariffs on the grain, after 2008. Pegged with the end of subsidies, tortilla prices were now effectively pegged to global prices. This was problematic for consumers because the global price of corn increased with the demand for alternative energy sources, such as corn-based ethanol. After 2008, the prospect of rising tortilla costs, because of the significant influence of global markets, gradually became a reality that consumers have had to face. Furthermore, potential consumer relief, such as the return of tortilla or corn subsidies and/or renegotiating the NAFTA, can be considered anathema to the *laissez faire*-leaning Calderón and his PAN party.

The third and final trend of tortilla prices in Mexico City was characterized by steady and unrelenting increases that have been met with recent popular unrest. Tortilla prices obviously

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increased over the period and prospects concerning prices continue to point upward. However, as mentioned, the 2008 level of wage-corrected tortilla prices, which is the apex of this period’s prices, are not exceptional and high prices were seen in the 1940s and 1950s. Public demonstrations and other expressions of concern were far less common and vocal prior to the last two decades, and they were also concentrated in the countryside, however. In part, this has been because the Mexican government’s decision to adopt new macroeconomic policies and dedication to refrain from market interventions has taken priority over providing cheap food to its population. Whereas the PRI had vested interests in maintaining inexpensive basic foodstuffs, since 1982 and after the PRI’s ousting from the presidency in 2000, the government has been reluctant to involve itself in economic sectors.

In large part, the recent protests concerning prices could be attributed to the gradual changes in Mexican politics that started years ago. As mentioned, starting in the 1960s after the Tlatelolco incident and after other events, such as the earthquake response in 1986, and culminating with the election of the PAN in 2000, Mexican politics became more open and a more civic society emerged throughout the country. The number of grass-roots level groups, such as Asemblea de Barrios, grew in urban areas, and have become important political constituencies. Groups other than urban middle-class workers have been able to garner the attention of political regimes, and have found causes, such as high tortilla prices, to make political parties compete and jockey to satisfy their appeals. Historical political coalitions in Mexico have changed and continue to change. Furthermore, rising tortilla prices during this last period have been a powerful cause for the re-crafting of urban political coalitions in the country.

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64 Ochoa 171, 178, 210.
How politics may have been a more significant factor related to protests will further discussed in Chapter 3.

Conclusions

The evolution of wage-corrected tortilla prices in Mexico’s Federal District and Mexico City from 1940 to 2008 does not provide the entire modern history of corn in the country, but it does offer strong conclusions concerning affordability of corn. More specifically, the evolution of prices offers strong conclusions that can be made concerning access to corn and tortillas, and consumer affordability in what is considered the country’s most important city. The first conclusion that can be inferred by the index is that there were three distinct periods of tortilla prices in Mexico, and that the recent trend of rising prices was not exceptional in the last four decades. Second, tortilla prices followed historical political decisions by the PRI to privilege certain populations. Consequently, Mexico’s turn to neoliberalism entailed a significant reduction of the state’s intervention in markets and had significant effects on the affordability of tortillas for many groups. Finally, casting neoliberalism as the only overarching reason for rising prices would be inaccurate; political dynamics in Mexico must be considered when looking at prices and the urban unrest.

As mentioned, the first conclusion that can be drawn from the index of wage-corrected tortilla prices is that there were three distinct periods of prices. During the first period, prices dramatically decreased for more than three decades. In the second period (1973-1994) tortilla prices seemed to have bottomed out and had no trend. Mexicans’ purchasing power grew at times and shrank in this period, which coincided with at times when the country’s economy was relatively strong and went through significant contractions. The third period of prices (1995-2008) was a gradual yet steady increase that corresponded with the adoption of new economic
policies and changes in political policies and agendas throughout the period. Collectively, the
three periods of prices suggest that Mexicans, specifically in Mexico City, have experienced
important changes in tortilla prices over the majority of the twentieth-century, and the early years
into the twenty first-century have not been different.

The second conclusion extending from the index of wage-corrected tortilla prices is that
the trends of Mexico’s tortilla prices have been directly related to political and economic policies
in the country over the given period. During the first period, prices decreased significantly when
Mexico’s economy experienced modest growth. Throughout the period, the PRI was left to
continue appeasing its privileged urban working-class constituents that the regime had inherited
from Cardenismo’s policies. The second period consisted of relatively stable prices, despite
interruptions like the global oil crisis and Mexico’s debt crisis, which coincided with PRI market
interventions in the agricultural sector to maintain political legitimacy and a healthy period of
growth of the country’s economy labeled the “Mexican Miracle.” Tortilla prices during the third
and final period corresponded to political mismanagement of the economy in the 1980s and the
drastic economic changes thereafter, and the political reactions to consumer unrest.

The evolution of tortilla prices in Mexico City also supports the idea that access to corn
and tortillas after 1995 deteriorated significantly. A “typical” working Mexican earning a
manufacturing wage has lost and continues to lose their ability to purchase tortillas. Although
the prices decreased during some years after 1995, the overarching trend has been that a day’s
work has not been able to afford as much corn as years past. Moreover, prices, as of 2008, are
past levels that have not been seen for nearly five decades. As mentioned, the government’s
reluctance to revert to former practices and allowing the market to determine prices, because of
its dedication to being a participant in new economic policies after 1982, have adversely affected
how much corn Mexicans have access to. Essentially, tortillas, which have been part of the Mexican identity for centuries, have increasingly become a commodity that Mexicans in urban areas are finding more and more difficult to afford.

Finally, the evolution of tortilla prices shows that recent unrest related to tortilla prices in urban areas has not been entirely due to economic policy reforms. Prices definitely increased after changes to a more open economy occurred throughout the 1980s and especially after the 1990s. However, the level of prices have been seen before, but were met with less outright protest than what has occurred recently. Moreover, political parties have tried to respond to consumers’ situation first with “social liberalism,” then with price ceilings and agreements with private tortilla corporations and other forms. In essence, despite their commitment to market-oriented reforms, the national administrations have not completely ignored the trend of rising prices and have made interventions, albeit smaller than previous years, in markets.

As mentioned, the proliferation of popular unrest also could be because the political landscape in Mexico changed dramatically during recent decades. A more democratic and civic society emerged over the period and has found causes, such as the gradual rise of tortilla prices, to express dissatisfaction with their government. With the PRI’s ousting from executive governance in 2000, the public realized the value of organized action and the magnitude of its influence on politics. Furthermore, rising tortilla and corn prices have united urban populations enough that the state has responded in some ways to help consumers. As will be discussed in Chapters 2 and 3, rural groups have also become galvanized to protest policies on corn production and trade that were detrimental to their welfare.
CHAPTER II. FROM COMMONPLACE TO CONCERN: CORN IN MEXICO’S RURAL AREAS, 1934-2008

Mexicans living in rural areas, like urban residents, are increasingly vocalizing their discontent to certain economic and political policies related to corn. People in the rural areas of Mexico, however, do not have problems affording corn, high tortilla prices, or access to the grain. This is because they have the ability to attain corn relatively easier than city dwellers. Their location and, many times, occupational circumstances make producing and accessing corn relatively less problematic. Yet, over the last two decades, there are significant problems surrounding corn in the country’s rural areas. These problems are related to social issues, employment and livelihoods, and environmental worries. Each of the problems surrounding corn in the country has come about because of political and economic events over the last half of the twentieth-century and the early part of the twenty-first.

Like urban areas, politics has had important effects on corn agriculture in the countryside. Throughout much of the PRI’s reign over Mexican politics, from the early 1940s to 2000, the rural areas of Mexico were what could be called a secondary priority to the regimes. The primary concern for the PRI was to make sure privileged urban constituents had enough food security, which ensured the regime maintaining political legitimacy, as discussed in the previous chapter. Providing campesinos with what they feel are adequate supplies or resources to maintain their living or earn a profit were lesser worries for the government. Moreover, providing corn producers with prices for what feel are fair and the resources to compete in increasingly difficult market conditions were deemed less important than making sure that urban consumers have cheap basic foods.
Undoubtedly, economics over the twentieth and early twenty-first century have had implications on corn in the countryside. Mexico’s development model immediately after the Mexican Revolution actually favored and empowered the countryside to an extent, which was beneficial to corn producers. During the second half of the twentieth-century, Mexico’s agricultural sector, particularly peasant farming, underwent changes that altered the livelihoods of millions of producers. By the end of the twentieth-century and since, rural groups have seen economic factors heavily influence and change their patterns of employment and disrupted social structures. These macroeconomic frameworks, combined with the political dynamics of the country, have managed to create distress because they have combined to reduce the biodiversity of local Mexican corn. In addition, there have been mounting worries in rural Mexico that the country’s adoption of different economic policies changed corn’s cultural significance, along with the country’s biodiversity.

Collectively, politics and economics have both been large factors in the modern history of corn in Mexico’s rural areas. Both factors help explain how over the course of the last eighty years, policies related to corn have become part of larger discussions, such as political debates, arguments concerning the sustainability and entitlements that rural farmers are owed to them. This evolution of corn’s significance and symbolism in the countryside, like in Mexico’s urban areas, has been dynamic. Also similar to its history in Mexican cities, corn’s narrative in the countryside has been periodical. Furthermore, in the countryside, the concerns surrounding corn continue to grow and explain more about the political conscious of Mexicans.

For this chapter, the majority of the sources used to detail the changing history of corn in Mexico’s countryside were relevant secondary sources. As mentioned, access to corn or tortillas in Mexico’s countryside, unlike urban areas, historically was not a problem because of corn
farmers’ ability to produce for themselves. Hence, a quantitative study of corn prices for farmers or an examination of rising tortilla prices would not be an appropriate way to explain Mexicans’ discontent related to corn in the countryside. Instead, a number of social, historical, economic and anthropological studies across different academic areas were collected to narrate the country’s different agricultural policies, economic models, political influences and other factors that had effects on the history of corn in Mexico over the last several decades.

Mexico’s Campesinos and Corn, 1934-1940

After the Mexican Revolution (1910-1921) corn production and the country’s food security as a whole were matters that the state would have to deal with. Outbreaks of violence during the fighting caused food shortages and products like corn saw its production drop more than a third from what levels had been during the first decade of the twentieth-century. With the social upheaval of the revolution and the breakdown of the government, politicians thereafter saw food security as an integral part of the country’s future prospects for stability and peace. An illustration of how serious food shortages and adequately supplying food was during the revolution was illustrated in a film produced by the government in 1936. In Vamonos con Pacho Villa corn is seen being distributed to different towns by Villa’s northern army. Villa, portrayed as an affable and burly revolutionary hero in the film set during the revolution, has peasants flocking to his railroad car to receive ears of corn stolen from the rich and government sympathizers. While Vamonos con Pancho Villa was a film production and not confirmed to

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be true, the scene emphasized the importance of sufficient food supplies, specifically corn, in the country.

Almost immediately after the revolution, a newly written constitution provided the state with mechanisms to intervene in economic sectors to ensure food security. Hence the federal government studied and attempted to fix supply problems and food prices. Through funding from the Almacenes Generales de Deposito de Credito Agricola (General Warehouses of Agricultural Credit), storagehouses for corn and other grains were built throughout the country to allow producers to sell their products easier. The government also opened offices, such as the Dirección General de la Economía Rural (General Direction/Director of Rural Economy), to study harvests and costs of inputs for producers. It should be mentioned that the state was only modestly successful in relieving prices and alleviating producers’ problems. However, what was important was the precedent set: the government would play a large role in food markets, which was a practice that continued in the 1930s and beyond.

Between 1934 and 1940, because of principles and beliefs favored by President Lázaro Cardenas, Mexico’s campesinado (rural groups) became a pillar for the country’s national development. This meant that groups, such as rural producers, were a favored population and policies were aimed at helping them. Cardenas believed that Mexico’s established ejido (communal land) land reform would allow the countryside to provide the country with the food it needed. Moreover, rural producers would, with significant state assistance, eventually be able to export the agricultural surplus, thus advancing the country’s economic development. With this

67 Ochoa 32-33.
in mind, it was no mistake that Cardenas redistributed more than 20 million hectares (1 hectare equals 2.47 acres) of the country’s most irrigated land to *campesinos*.

Cardenas did not simply distribute land in hopes of gaining popularity with his *campesino* constituency; he also invested resources and time into the countryside. Millions of pesos were spent on irrigating much of the *ejidatarios* around the country. In addition, Cardenas’ administration supplied seeds and fertilizers. During Cardenas’ tenure, the amount of land grown in irrigated zones went from 19 percent to more than 28 percent. Also, the *Secretaría de Agricultura y Fomento* (SAF; Secretary of Agriculture and Development) provided farmers 15,000 kilograms of insecticide and 7.5 million kilograms of seeds to plant beans, wheat, and corn. The SFA (State Food Agency), established by Cardenas in 1937, went as far as guaranteeing minimum prices to corn producers and making agricultural transportation prices cheaper to repel the idea of importing corn. 

The establishment of the Ejido Bank in the late-1930s provided technical assistance and financial credit to growers. Politically, he was able to create a corporate tie between *campesinos* and the state by creating the *Confederación Nacional de Campesinos* (CNC [National Campesino Confederation]) in 1938, which provided rural groups direct and corporate ties to the government.

*Cardenismo*, the labeled attached to Cardenas’ policies, and the aid its tenets extended towards rural farmers proved to be detrimental towards small-scale corn producers, however. Government policies to help guarantee corn prices could not keep pace with market prices and summarily failed to be remunerative. For example, the SFA’s rural corn price in 1939 stayed the

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69 Ochoa 42.

70 Ibid. 55-57.
same as the previous year, which was a reflection of the Agency’s lack of knowledge concerning producer costs.\textsuperscript{71} In addition, the state’s efforts to help small producers with transportation cost were eventually failures because of poor infrastructure to get small-scale farmers products to the market, and only helped large producers in the country.\textsuperscript{72} More importantly, as mentioned in the previous chapter, Cardenas’ institutional building provided the underpinning of the policies to come. After Cardenas, the state would constantly deal with appeasing their privileged urban constituents, while also having to deal with the threat of trouble from the countryside.

Corn and the Green Revolution in Mexico’s Countryside, 1940-1981

Mexican agriculture after 1940 operated under what has been called a “bimodal” or “two-tiered” system.\textsuperscript{73} The government did the minimum it had to in order to appease small-scale rural producers. On the other hand, the state also embraced large-scale commercial agri-business to supply cheap foodstuffs to urban consumers by providing state-sponsored subsides, fertilizers, financial credit and an overall economic structure conducive to commercial agriculture. Mexico’s “two-tiered” agriculture system would create several problems that the state was forced to deal with throughout this period.

The country was experiencing extensive industrialization for much of the decades prior to the early-1980s. Key to this industrialization, which would last for more than two decades and well into the 1970s, was keeping inflation in check and keeping urban wages low by ensuring

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{71} Ibid. 53.
\item \textsuperscript{72} Ibid. 63.
\item \textsuperscript{73} Tom Barry. \textit{Zapata’s Revenge: Free Trade and the Farm Crisis in Mexico} (Boston: South End Press, 1995), 27.
\item DeWalt, Billie R. and Martha W. Rees, with the assistance of Arthur D. Murphy. \textit{The End of Agrarian Reform in Mexico: Past Lessons, Future Prospects} (USA: Center for U.S.-Mexican Studies, University of California, San Diego, 1994), 44.
\end{itemize}
abundant agricultural production. Increasing agricultural production was done through the Banco Nacional de Crédito Ejidal (National Ejido Credit Bank; hereafter BNCE), which extended public and private loans to farmers, particularly larger farmers on already-irrigated lands in Northern Mexico, not ejidos and smaller producers in the remainder of the country. Moreover, these loans were aimed at modernizing farming techniques particularly for wheat and export crops, not corn because of the lower rates of return.\textsuperscript{74} Also key to the modernization of the agricultural sector was changing farmers’ production techniques, which opened the way for the Green Revolution.

In the early-1940s, the Rockefeller Foundation began agricultural experiments involving hybrid and fertilizer-responsive seeds in Mexico agriculture, which eventually became labeled as the Green Revolution. The entire effort was initiated, financed and supervised by the Rockefeller Foundation. With the idea of increasing agricultural efficiency and increasing, the Foundation, in conjunction with the Secretaría de Agricultura y Ganadería (SAG; Secretary of Agriculture and Livestock), promoted fertilizer-responsive, hybrid seed varieties that were developed in laboratories in the U.S. and Mexico. This was integrated with farm management routines that centered on the use of biocides and modern machinery.\textsuperscript{75} By 1946, the Mexican government, under President Miguel Alemán, had established the Corn Commission to distribute the first new hybrid corn and wheat seeds to farmers, which were subsequently passed out in 1947 and 1948.\textsuperscript{76}

\textsuperscript{74} Ochoa 101-102.
Mexican agriculture was dramatically transformed during the Green Revolution. In relations to finances, the Mexican government spent 3.3 billion pesos building dams, electrical-generation facilities, roads and other infrastructure. Between 1930 and 1960, according to David Sonnenfeld, irrigated lands in Mexico increased almost 50 percent. Tractor usage in the agricultural industry also increased substantially. Moreover, the amount of rain-fed arable land grew significantly between 1940-1950. Corn production went from 1.6 million tons in 1940 to 14.1 million tons in 1985. Other crops, such as beans and sorghum, also experienced increases in production levels immediately after the start of the Green Revolution.\(^77\) In sum, Mexico’s agricultural output (4.6 percent per year) after 1950 and well into the 1970s grew faster than the population (3.3 percent per year) and the country became agriculturally self-sufficient.\(^78\)

While the Green Revolution seemed like the blessing that the Mexican state needed to fuel their urban-led industrialization, there were consequences from the country’s decision to participate in the undertaking. By the late 1960s many of the contradictions and problems of the project began to show. Government loans were largely unavailable or difficult to attain for farmers who were not large landholders. Land ownership and control became concentrated, which went in the face of Mexican revolutionary ideals and Cárdenas’ legacy of land redistribution. Workers in the country’s expanding commercial agricultural sector were paid less than living wages and many supplemented their income by having family members move to urban centers or the U.S. to earn meager but better wages and remit funds. By 1960, 83 percent of the country’s farmers could support their families only at a subsistence or infra-subsistence level.\(^79\) Also by 1960, 15 million hectares had been abandoned, suggesting that more and more

\(^{77}\) Sonnenfeld 32-33.  
\(^{78}\) Cotter 233.  
\(^{79}\) Sonnenfeld 34-35.
small rural producers changed their lifestyles and livelihoods to survive, so much that they abandoned their valued lands. During the 1960s and through the 1970s, small and medium sized farmers were, as Kirsten Appendini said, “marginalized and deprived of policy benefits.”

Environmental problems stemming from the project, such as deforestation, soil contamination, water shortages, groundwater depletion, insect infestations, topsoil losses, and human deaths attributed to pesticide use, also started to appear during the 1960s.

There were two other legacies of the Green Revolution that had tremendous affects on corn producers in Mexico’s rural areas: the emergence of a large transnational agro-industry and, as previously mentioned, the use of hybrid seeds. The presence of transnational agro-businesses in Mexico was not new by the middle of the twentieth-century. However, by the late-1960s and throughout the 1970s, agro-industry dominated Mexican agriculture. Companies tended to be dedicated towards the production of export crops, such as strawberries, asparagus, and broccoli, while less land went into the growing of corn and other staple products. This was primarily because the prices for these products were heavily regulated to maintain the state’s policy of supplying cheap foods for urban demands. U.S.-based investment into the Mexican food processing industry went from $109 million in 1966 to $229 in 1978. Moreover, according to James Cockcroft, 10 percent of U.S. manufacturing investment in Mexico went towards the food industry, while the profits of the transnational corporations doubled between 1965 and 1975. Also according to Cockcroft, about 25 corporations, 18 of which were American, monopolized

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80 Ibid. 32.
82 Sonnenfeld 38-41.
83 Sonnenfeld 36.
certain markets for foods like strawberries and frozen vegetables.\textsuperscript{84} During the Echeverría sexenio (1970-1976) public-sector investment largely went towards agro-export agriculture through the granting of exemptions for the importation of foreign farm machinery, providing tax subsides to large Northern farmers, and promoting cattle ranching. The Revolution indeed generated profits for market producers, but, as Tom Barry explained, “the 30 percent to 50 percent who \textit{campesinos} existed on the margins of the market were largely ignored,” throughout the 1960s and 1970s.\textsuperscript{85}

The other major effect for rural corn producers stemming from the Green Revolution was the introduction of hybrid seeds into Mexican agriculture. While proponents of the Revolution believed that hybrid seeds would solve worldwide hunger through helping farmers produce larger, more durable and predictable harvests, many rural farmers were denied the benefits. Many small farmers were given what were called \textit{chahuixtle} or impure seeds, and no, or expensive, adulterated agrochemicals. Many times, state institutions like the BNCE and the \textit{Productora Nacional de Semillas} (PRONASE; National Seed Producers) also failed to provide sound technical advice for using the new seeds, and were accused of giving farmers dictatorial treatment.\textsuperscript{86} Other complaints about the hybrid seeds included: shorter stalks that provided less fodder for livestock, fewer kernels than traditional varieties, and that they made tortillas with bad taste or texture. Peasants also mentioned that the seeds were less resistant to corn worms, required unaffordable pesticides to control pests, were sold by untrustworthy urban vendors, and

\textsuperscript{84} Ibid. 36.
\textsuperscript{85} Barry 38.
\textsuperscript{86} Cotter 236.
required a uniform planting time, which made the corn more vulnerable to late frosts than traditional strains.\textsuperscript{87}

By the middle of the 1970s the luster of the Green Revolution began to fade and change was wanted in rural areas. The project received international criticism for its shortcomings, which included only helping commercial producers and questionable science. It was also viewed as an American strategy to spread U.S. economic hegemony and not a genuine altruistic effort.\textsuperscript{88} In the countryside, rural peasant leaders like Genaro Vásquez and Lucio Cabañas led uprisings against what they felt was disregard for the predicament of the \textit{campesinos}.\textsuperscript{89} Many people felt the revolution provided few benefits for the peasants who needed the most help and saw the entire effort as a corrupt institution. However, motivated in large part by urban inflation and discontent after the Tlatelolco Massacre in 1968, the government made successful efforts to quell national discontent.

President Echeverría expanded the State Food Agency in the countryside by increasing the amount of rural outlets from 43 in 1970 to 920 in 1976.\textsuperscript{90} The state-paid guaranteed price of corn was also raised after years of being stagnant.\textsuperscript{91} Infused with early earnings from massive oil discoveries, President López Portillo was able to, as he said several times during the early part of his term (1976-1982), “administer the abundance” of resources and continued state interventions in markets.\textsuperscript{92} Early in his term, by creating the \textit{Sistema Alimentaria Mexicana} (SAM; Mexican Alimentary System), partnered with the SFA, López Portillo was able to open more rural stores

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{87} Ibid. 256-257.
\item \textsuperscript{88} Ibid. 263.
\item \textsuperscript{89} Ochoa 179.
\item \textsuperscript{90} Ibid. 183.
\item \textsuperscript{91} Ibid. 186.
\end{itemize}
to help market rural products, expand grain storage units in the countryside, purchase more corn from *campesinos*, further raise guaranteed crop prices, and ultimately integrate rural agricultural producers to the national market.\textsuperscript{93}

While the efforts to curtail rural dissatisfaction for the government and the Green Revolution were effective to an extent, small corn producers were already too far marginalized. In the eyes of peasants the government policies directly to the Green Revolution were poorly enacted and benefits for small peasant farmers were difficult to notice. Proof of the revolution’s shortcomings and ineffective policies were evident by the fact that by the 1980s, within 20 years of agricultural self-sufficiency, Mexico was a net importer of corn.\textsuperscript{94} This signal of disappointment for producers could have been viewed as a sign of more trouble to come in the near future. In essence, because of the way policies stemming from the Green Revolution carried out, the project could be said to have been a failed effort and detrimental to the millions of peasant farmers.

Corn in the Neoliberal Era, 1981-1994

For rural corn producers, the 1980s began with what appeared to be upbeat prospects and improvement. Revenues from some of the country’s profitable industries looked as if they would trickle down to helping rural corn farmers. And, for some years at the outset of this period, *campesino*-grown corn benefitted from national short-lived economic growth. The early-1980s and first half of the 1990s became a period tremendous adjustment and disappointment,

\textsuperscript{93} Ochoa 189-190.
however. Furthermore, by the end of this period, Mexican agriculture was almost entirely
different from what it had been during previous periods.

During the latter part of López Portillo’s administration, Mexico made larger discoveries
of oil deposits around the country that, in turn, made the country flush with “petro dollars.” Oil
earnings translated into substantial increases in GDP and were responsible for creating more than
one million jobs in the country.\(^\text{95}\) With the economy performing quite well in the latter years of
the 1970s and even stronger performance in the early-1980s, López Portillo made attempts to
finally achieve self-sufficiency in food production through further expansions of the SAM. It
was believed that the country’s oil money could be invested towards helping the country’s rural
agricultural providers become more integrated into national markets by improving transport
methods and extending credit for producers in the countryside. And, during the first years of the
SAM’s creation, rural producers did prosper. However, the sharp drop of global oil prices in
1982 brought about large macroeconomic changes in Mexico and the SAM was shutdown in
1982 by newly elected president, Miguel De La Madrid, and replaced with programs that
guaranteed only modest prices for grains and minor infrastructural investments in certain rain-fed
areas around the country.\(^\text{96}\)

As mentioned in the previous chapter, after 1982 Mexico’s economy started a gradual but
permanent shift towards a more open economy. State-run companies and enterprises were
gradually closed, liquidated and privatized. For small-scale producers, the change in the
economy meant a halt to state subsidies, less social provisions and Mexico’s integration into
global agricultural markets. During the middle of the 1980s, the United States, in efforts to

\(^{95}\) Peter H. Smith, “Mexico since 1946: Dynamics of an authoritarian regime,” *Mexico since
\(^{96}\) Ibid. 385.
expand its agricultural markets, were keen to sell Mexico basic grains, such as corn, at subsidized prices, with low interest rates and long payback schedules. While these imports of basic grains were helpful towards urban residents in Mexico, they were detrimental towards rural producers because the prices of their commodities were undercut. By the late-1980s, problems for producers in the countryside were compounded further when 45 percent of the country’s arable land was dedicated towards corn farming and 40 percent of corn producers depended on some form of government price supports. Furthermore, the guaranteed real prices of products like corn and bean continually decreased throughout the 1980s. Not surprisingly, during the 1980s and early-1990s, many rural agricultural workers found it difficult to support themselves only through their farming and consequently felt compelled to move to urban areas or immigrate to the U.S for work.

By the time of Carlos Salinas’ presidency (1988-1994), the state’s role in agricultural markets was, by design, gradually reduced. In 1991, the *Apoyos y Servicios a la Comercialización Agropecuaria* (ASERCA; Support and Services for Commercial Agriculture and Livestock) was created to ease the removal of guaranteed prices for producers who had been dependent on them for so many years through the State Food Agency. According to the ASERCA mission, state subsidies for basic grains would be provided to producers if, and only if, the producers could show that national prices of the grains were below proven production costs. Implicitly, ASERCA was created to further reduce the state’s social welfare role for

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97 Barry 99.
98 Ibid. 103.
99 Ochoa 213.
small farmers and, as Naude and Barceinas explained, start the process of completely removing
the state from supplying guaranteed agricultural prices.  

In 1993, as further gestures on the part of the state’s large efforts to ease the transition to
a more open economy for rural producers and campesinos, President Salinas initiated the
Programa de Apoyo al Campo (PROCAMPO; Program for the Support of Rural
Producers/Residents). PROCAMPO was designed to distribute direct payments to more than 3
million producers around the country to fund and encourage modernization of production and
increased output. In order to help campesinos, who were hurting the most from the state’s
gradual de-escalation of agricultural market intervention, smaller producers received more
government aid than larger producers. Gradually, the payments dispersed to producers would
decrease and be completely phased out. The payments, however, were also set to finish well
before the start of the newly negotiated NAFTA. This was significant because the agreement
had explicit inclusion of diminishing tariff rate quotas (TRQs) for corn imports from the U.S.
into Mexico that would eventually be eliminated completely in 2008, which meant that the state
would no longer provide any meaningful aid towards small corn farmers. 

Like urban tortilla consumers during the same period, the shift to a more open economy
for Mexico’s countryside was measured, but the changes were met with trepidation. Many
campesinos were not in favor of participating in a free trade agreement that included agricultural
products with two of the most economically developed countries in the world. In fact, some
Mexicans some groups, such as the Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional (EZLN; Zapatista
Army of National Liberation), spent 1993 preparing for what became armed insurrections against
the Mexican government’s free trade venture. Other campesinos made their way to Mexico City

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101 Naude and Barceinas 193.
102 Ibid. 214.
to stage mass protest against the government’s decisions. Nonetheless, corn’s existence under the free trade era continued.

Corn and *Campesinos* during the Free Trade Era and Globalization, 1995-2008

Since 1994, the tensions surrounding corn policies in Mexico’s countryside have intensified and become realities. Small farmers have seen shrinking profits because of global competition. Other farmers have felt compelled to leave their lands in order to find other non-agricultural jobs because corn farming produced only subsistence-level incomes. Movements surrounding corn in Mexico’s countryside have also included environmental damage done to lands. Free trade and neoliberal economic policies have also been blamed for alterations done to Mexico’s biodiversity. Collectively, these circumstances have made corn the center of major debates and arguments throughout the countryside.

During the early years of the NAFTA, which went into effect in 1994, corn was a product that the Mexican government made real efforts to protect from quickly becoming tariff-free, but the efforts eventually fell short. According the agreement’s protocol, Mexico was allowed to import 2.5 million tons of corn from the United States duty free, with the volume of increasing at annual rate of 3 percent after 1994, until finally reaching 3.67 million tons in 2008. Imports above the stated quota allowed the government to impose duties that started at 215 percent in 1994. As mentioned, these duties were designed to gradually decrease to zero fourteen years after 1994.

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after the agreement was signed. These measured precautions were quite necessary for Mexico’s rural producers, but they would not be sufficient enough if the demand for corn outpaced the levels of tariffs.

According to John Ross, the NAFTA “opened the floodgates to cheap, high-tech corn from the United States and Canada” to enter and establish a foothold in Mexican markets. In 1998, only four years after the start of the agreement, fourteen millions tons of corn were brought into Mexico, tripling pre-NAFTA levels. While farmers in the U.S. and Canada work within a larger, more mechanized and subsidized agri-business industry, most Mexican farmers grow their corn on plots less than five acres and work by hand, which hampers peasants’ chances to keep pace with their foreign competitors. Also by 1998, transnational companies like the Cargill Corporation, the world’s largest privately owned corporation and one of the largest suppliers of genetically modified grains, made major investments into Mexican markets. Cargill’s profits for 1998 were half a billion dollars on sales of $51 billion – roughly equivalent to Mexico’s entire federal budget in the late-1990s - and accounted for 40 percent of Mexico’s grain imports and 10 percent of the country’s harvest.

It should be noted in 1998 the Mexican government began a moratorium on the planting of transgenic seeds. Because of pressure from different environmental groups around the country, who feared that possible affects that pollen outflows could have on native tripsacum or

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teocintle (wild corn natives to Mexico). With the increase of U.S. corn exports, which were said to contain up of 30 percent transgenic corn, groups pressured the government to make efforts to preempt any possible “contamination.” Also using the argument that Mexico was the home to large corn biodiversity, the groups were able to successfully lobby the government to enact the moratorium. Of importance in the enactment of the Congress-approved moratorium, campesinos and other rural groups were not entirely involved in the pressures on the state; pressure came from science circles and environmentalists. Moreover, worries commonly related in protests against GM products, such as health uncertainties, were not mentioned – concerns for the biodiversity seemed to have been the grounds for the imposed moratorium.

Heading into the twenty-first century corn and corn farmers in Mexico continued to experience changes. Between 1993 and 1999 the real-inflation adjusted market price of corn had fallen 46.2 percent and Mexican corn prices converged with international prices 12 years earlier than anticipated. By 1999, President Ernesto Zedillo essentially completed the dismantling of the State Food Agency (known as CONASUPO at the time). Programs like the Programa Nacional de Solidaridad (PRONASOL [National Solidarity Program]), which helped provide subsidized corn for millers around the country, saw funds cut. Other programs, such as Distribuidora e Impulsora Comercial Consasupo (DICONSA; Commercial Distributors and Transportation for CONASUPO), who truly helped rural producers transport their products from

106 Greg Traxler, Salvador Golday-Avila, José Falck-Zepeda, and José de Jesús Espinoza-Arellano, “Transgenic Cotton in Mexico: Economic and Environmental Impact,” Auburn University and International Maize and Wheat Improvement Center. (La Laguna, Coahuila, Mexico: No date, volume or number listed.): 4.
the countryside to marketplace, also saw their demise.” Furthermore, as mentioned in Chapter 1, the termination of state subsidies was considered temporary hardships for urban consumers. For Mexican producers, however, there were no long-term benefits that came along with free trade agreements combined with the loss of agricultural subsidies.

The problems with the influx of foreign corn into Mexico extended farther than farmers’ income losses in November 2001. Researchers Ignacio Chapela and David Quist published an article in *Nature*, Britain’s most prestigious scientific magazine, which concluded that the Mexican maize genome on native landraces had been contaminated with introgressed transgenic DNA. According to the report, maize species in Oaxaca had traceable amounts of genetically modified (GM) organisms commonly used in industrial agriculture. Quist, in a 2003 interview, said that the transgenic corn was thought to have come from farmers planting the seeds in the fields – seeds sold in food agencies within the region, which were known to have significant amounts of corn imports from the U.S. – or via wind blown from an industrial maize plant 60 miles away in Puerto Vallarta. Regardless of how the corn was planted or the strains arrived to Oaxaca, groups quickly expressed concern.

The potential backlash from the idea that transnational seed companies had contaminated the genetic variability of Mexican corn turned into a public relations scare for the government.

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109 Naude and Barceinas 193, 196.
and transnational corn importers. Mexico’s government was keen to begin its own testing concerning the findings and exercised restraint by not expanding the country’s moratorium on transgenic or denounce foreign imports. Meanwhile, immediately after the initial expressed concerns related to the article, Monsanto, the world’s largest transgenic seed company, launched a public relations campaign to discredit the article. Monsanto hired Bivings Group, a global public relations firm, and, using names of what were said to have been fictitious scientists, argued against the Nature article. Eventually Nature published a partial retraction of the article (the first time the magazine had taken such an action in more than a century of publishing).\textsuperscript{113}

Not long after 2001, however, Mexico’s Ministry of Environment confirmed that farmers’ varieties in Oaxaca and Puebla had contaminated DNA from GM corn.\textsuperscript{114}

Despite a national moratorium on planting transgenic crop seeds made earlier in 1998 by the government, the potential damage to Mexico’s corn genetic variability seemed to have started and many citizens expressed their worry.\textsuperscript{115} Campesino groups like the Committee of Non-Government Organizations and En Defensa del Maíz (In Defense of Corn) put forth further efforts to start a more stringent moratorium on transgenic corn and other grains. They also protested and appealed to Mexico’s Consultation Group on Agricultural Research to show some kind of meaningful reaction to what had been confirmed.\textsuperscript{116} Furthermore, international groups started to pay attention to what was going on in Mexico in relations to its corn problems. Groups such as the Commission for Environmental Cooperation, an international cooperation created in

\textsuperscript{113} Jeffery M. Smith, \textit{Seeds of Deception} (Iowa: Yes! Books, 2003), 221.
conjunction with the NAFTA, published an article explaining how little was known about transgenic corn imports and the affects they have on small-scale producers.\textsuperscript{117}

Another byproduct of free trade on corn was the unanticipated environmental damage in Mexico that became noticeable after 2001. The economic hardship taken on by Mexican farmers after the removal of state subsidies and free trade have fell into pressures to do what they have to in order to maintain output. By 2002, as Alejandro Nadal pointed out, the pressures to produce drove many farmers to expand their area of cultivation to marginal lands, which resulted in soil erosion and encroachment on biosphere reserves and other protected lands in the country. And, for many of Mexico’s poorest farmers, they relied on poor soils, so yields were low and the potential for crop failure was high.\textsuperscript{118} Other environmental impacts for farmers who tried to keep pace with large-scale producers included increases in chemical usage for farming, water pollution due to run-off, and unsustainable water use for irrigation purposes.\textsuperscript{119} Environmental circumstances such as these were common in Mexico prior to the free trade era, but they were intensified after 2002.

During the Vicente Fox presidency (2000-2006), thousands of farmers began what became organized protests against the government, and demanded that the state effectively respond to their growing uneasiness revolving around corn. One of the complaints of the protestors was that small farmers were not beneficiaries of the NAFTA, with many farmers going bankrupt trying to compete within increasingly demanding markets, while commercial

\textsuperscript{118} Nadal 157.
companies remained viable competitors in markets. In addition, there were appeals for Mexico to pressure the U.S. to scale back its farm subsidies. Fox’s administration responded by discussing increases in aid to rural farmers. Javier Usabiaga, Fox’s Agriculture Minister, also admitted the state’s policy towards the countryside needed an overhaul. However, in 2003, talks between the protestors and the state ended when Fox said that renegotiating the NAFTA was out of the question. This was not surprising because of Fox’s political party, Partido Acción Nacional (PAN; National Action Party), historically leaned towards liberal economic policies. What was surprising was that the protestors responded to this by warning that they would block ports and border crossings with the U.S. to prevent corn imports.120

The situation surrounding corn during this final period became more complicated after 2003. The flood of genetically modified corn imports that made their way into genetic strains of Mexican corn, combined with no signs of slowing down the imports, created questions about how much the government valued the country’s intimate legacy with corn and its connection to the country’s culture and history. Many Mexicans felt that the country’s genetic corn variety, which went back centuries, was being compromised and consequently lost in the name of profits. Moreover, the millions of the small farmers who were the preservers or “custodians of genetic diversity” saw their work and skills become unappreciated and ultimately ignored.121

Furthermore, as Appendini explained, when the role of small farmers and the curators of maize

121 Alejandro Nadal, “The Environmental & Social Impacts of Economic Liberalization on Corn Production in Mexico,” a study commissioned by Oxfam GB and WWF International (September 2000), 5.
in Mexico were ignored, rural livelihoods became disrupted, incomes decreased and government
dependence increased.\textsuperscript{122}

In essence, Mexico’s corn problems in rural areas involve more than the unquantifiable
loss of creole corn. The livelihoods of millions of farmers, especially from southern regions in
the country, stood to no lose their occupations that involve the passing down of generations-old
knowledge about maize, because of how easily corn could be imported. Imports, needless to say,
brought down prices of domestic corn because consumers may not be willing to pay higher costs
for criollo (native, authentic) Mexican corn simply because it is native to the country and farmed
by native farmers. Consumers, as will discussed in chapter 3, have been concerned with prices,
and if imported corn could be more efficiently grown and preferred by tortilla companies, then
concerns for domestic farmers will see their symbolic importance decrease as well as demand for
their products. The confluence of livelihoods being lost and decreased incomes for rural corn
farmers had the potential to increase dependence of the state to either help rural groups continue
to farm, via subsidies or marketing strategies helping promote native grown corn, or providing
social welfare for farmers in some form. As appropriately pointed out by scientists and
academics in 2003 and 2004, Mexico’s economic and political policies related to corn in the
countryside had large socio-economic implications for large sectors of the country’s
population.\textsuperscript{123}

\textsuperscript{122} Appendini 72. The argument that transnational agribusiness would be disruptive to
rural life and limit rural opportunities also was explained by Gaspar Real Cabello’s, “The
Mexican State and the Agribusiness Model of Development in the Globalisation Era.” The
Australian Journal of Social Issues, volume 38 (February 1, 2003), 137.
\textsuperscript{123} DeSantis 3.
Appendini 72.
After 2004, Mexico’s situations concerning rural displacement and the conservation of biodiversity became part of larger and established conservation discourses. Farmers’ situations and the backlash against corn policies in rural areas were no longer isolated cases which only handfuls of Mexicans worried about. Campesinos’ problems became similar to millions of other small farmers around the world who were also adjusting to agricultural globalization and economic liberalization. Mexico’s small corn farmers began fitting the profile of other people who were marginalized in the name of profits stemming from globalization and transnational agricultural companies. About Mexico as far back as 1997, renowned conservationist Vandana Shiva said that imports from agricultural globalization had led to the corporatization of world agriculture that was allowing for the concentration of global agriculture to be concentrated in the hands of a few monopolistic companies. Moreover, the globalization of agriculture was leading to deeper poverty for the poor and global food insecurity. Shiva, in discussing the plight of Mexican farmers, said, “In 1992 Mexico imported 20 percent of its food. In 1996 it is importing 43 percent. Eating ‘more cheaply’ on imports means not eating at all for the poor in Mexico. One out of every two peasants is not getting enough to eat, and in the two years since the introduction of the NAFTA the intake of food has been destroyed by 30 percent.”

Essentially, Mexico’s corn matters, seen as far back as the late-1990s by Shiva, no longer revolved around income, government subsides, and politics; it became part of larger international movements. Stemming from this larger movement, anxiety about how GM corn and transnational companies like Monsanto affect Mexican culture and control food sovereignty for its people has become more common. People worry that when transnational companies “own” or monopolize

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the patented rights to the global food production, millions of farmers, who cannot afford to pay seed companies their fees and royalties, lose the ability to even continue subsistence-level farming, and the needs of humanity become centralized in a given company or group. Some Mexicans, such as anthropologist Elena Lazos Chavero, have gone as far as saying that Mexican farmers’ GM corn situation “should be declared a sign for alarm at the international level that provokes powerful controversies related to social justice, self-determination and sovereignty.”

After 2004, groups, such as En Defensa Del Maíz, have appealed to the government for help using arguments about food sovereignty and respect for indigenous values and knowledge, but have received little help.

President Calderón’s administration (2006-present), which has dealt with the most popular unrest over corn, has offered relatively little help to the countryside. To curtail the proliferation of high tortilla prices in urban areas Calderón made agreements to freeze the prices of basic foods and oversaw deals with private tortilla millers to control prices. For rural areas, however, little relief has been offered. In response to massive protests in 2008, Calderón, like Fox (another PAN president), denied any renegotiating of the NAFTA and refused to alter the diminishing import tariff rate on corn, which completely disappeared on January 1, 2008. In addition, complaints by the protestors, who were coalitions involving the CNC, and the Asociación Nacional de Empresas del Campo (ANEC; National Association of Rural Industries), about the state’s annual $1.4 billion aid for farmers going towards northern states and commercial companies, were ignored. One of the only salvos that Calderón offered towards rural corn farmers was encouraging and helping peasant farmers to form large-scale cooperatives

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to compete in food markets. As in previous periods, the countryside has been largely ignored and their needs are lesser priorities for the regime.

It should be noted that while corn farmers in Mexico’s countryside have been dealing with the effects of the globalization of agriculture, prospects for campesinos have not gotten as grave as in other countries. In some countries, specifically India, there have been instances in which farmers have committed mass suicide after being confronted with debts and demands for copyright payments for patented seeds provided by transnational biotechnology corporations. As of recently, however, this has not been the case in Mexico. The Mexican government does not yet honor seed patents from companies like Monsanto or Cargill. Also, as evidenced in recent ethnographic studies by the Food and Agricultural Organization done in Mexico, many farmers in the campo (countryside) have a general distrust and reluctance to deal with commercial seed sellers, which increases the difficulties for formal introductions to transgenic seeds.

Furthermore, some farmers have shown that they have the ability to still withstand contractions in their income due to larger macroeconomic shocks that Mexico has experienced after its shift to a more open model. However, as Mexico’s participation in current and future trade

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127 This was said to the author via an email message with Ana de Ita, who works for the Centro de Estudios para el Cambio en el Campo Mexicano (Center of Studies for Change in Mexico’s Countryside). Ana de Ita, email message to author, December 15, 2009.
agreements grows and corporations devise ways to market their seeds to campesinos, the situation could change and the plight of farmers could become grave like other countries.

The final period of corn in Mexico’s countryside has been summarized by anxiety over corn policies stemming from larger trends in the country’s national economy and politics. Mexico’s decision to liberalize its agricultural sectors has progressively been detrimental to farmers in different ways. With the gradual disappearance of state subsidies for farmers and the dismantling of CONASUPO, farmers did see their incomes decrease. Free trade has been responsible for floods of corn imports, which has displaced the cultivation of authentic Mexican corn. Farmers have struggled to keep pace with competing in global agricultural markets, which has created environmental problems and brought about worries about rural displacement. Over this period, corn has also become part of larger discussions related to the impact of GM agricultural products, the arguments against the globalization of agricultural products, and other conservation-related movements. In essence, the problems associated with corn in Mexico’s countryside have matured and escalated over this final period.

Conclusions
Using a variety of resources to explain the history of corn in Mexico’s countryside offers three significant conclusions. The first conclusion that can be drawn about corn in rural areas has been that the history of corn and its producers has had to deal with economic and political changes to the country that, like tortilla prices in urban areas, have been detrimental to Mexican corn and its millions of farmers. After the country’s revolution and particularly during Cardenismo, campesinos were embraced and their success was considered an integral to national development. Between the 1940s and the 1980s, rural agricultural producers were considered secondary priorities to the PRI, but did receive infrequent help when their demands were vocal
enough. Throughout the 1990s and into recent years, small-scale farmers have become marginalized and largely ignored because of economic reforms and political policies. During this final period, problems related to corn, like tortilla prices in cities, became rallying points for rural groups used to appeal towards the government.

The second conclusion that can be drawn is that, unlike urban areas and past episodes in rural areas, the Mexican state has largely failed to change its policies and effectively respond to the problems revolving around corn in recent years. In the cities, when residents rose in large numbers to protest increasing food prices, particularly after 2000, the government has responded with meaningful actions. Administrations responded by negotiating deals with private companies to bring down the price of tortillas or offering price ceilings on foods. Also, when rural groups made demands for help from the state in the past, the government responded – they tried to alleviate transportation from the countryside to urban markets or created national trading networks. Over recent years, however, the state has done little to help rural producers or respond to the countryside’s complaints. Mentions of renegotiating the NAFTA have been quickly quashed before discussion, worries about GM corn have been allowed to grow, and the plight of millions of campesinos has worsened.

Finally, from the countryside further signs of the emergence of a civic society in Mexico are further illustrated. In urban areas during the late-1990s, the large political changes that occurred in politics allowed for groups to show their political influence to parties and demand change, which culminated with the PRI being ousted from national power. While rural constituents probably do not garner the same level of political leverage as urban groups, they have managed to find strategies to make politicians at listen to their complaints and notice their discontent. By staging massive protests and threatening to block ports and international borders,
they have gotten the attention of political regimes. Moreover, they have embraced the fact that the anxiety over corn policies and its farmers have been interwoven with larger environmental, conservation, and ethical-related movements. Using the many complaints involving corn, groups like *En Defensa Del Maíz*, Greenpeace, the CNC, and ENAC have managed to take their arguments to large platforms and make appeals towards the state. As will be detailed in the next chapter, the convergence of rural and urban groups uniting around corn has become a concern for the whole country.
CHAPTER III. CORN, NEOLIBERALISM AND POPULAR UNREST IN MEXICO, 1993-2008

As detailed in the previous chapters, the concerns surrounding corn in Mexico has been a slow but steady process. In cities, affordability of tortillas, the most important byproduct of corn for consumption, has created a source of contention between urban consumers and the government concerning access to tortillas created by economic and political dynamics. All the while, there has been mounting anxiety over corn in the countryside – also largely created by economic and political factors – concerning livelihoods, the environment, costs, and cultural aspects. Over the past three decades, both the cities and countryside have increasingly witnessed, and continue to witness, different problems with corn in some shape or form.

No longer are the arguments concerning corn policies entirely isolated problems limited to urban or rural areas, however. The combination of difficulties related to corn in cities and in the countryside has created what can be called a national problem. This is not to say that urban and rural groups ever gathered to start a national campaign of some sort, or that both groups created political platforms with corn policies as one of their central platform. Instead, what has occurred have been more and more protests in cities over certain policies related corn and tortillas as focal points that have had to be addressed. Over the same period, rural populations have also mounted increasing numbers of protests with other matters related to corn. The confluence of the protests from both areas and the growing magnitude of the protests have managed to converge. In 2007, the two protests from both populations converged, albeit momentarily, and Mexico witnessed how its citizenry could be mobilized, with corn and tortilla policies, as vehicles to protest larger economic and political frameworks.
Mexico’s modern conflicts involving corn policies can be chronicled through examining the protests in the country over the last three decades. Analyzing the many protests answers several questions. When did the protests start? What are the appeals that people are making? Are all Mexicans concerned over corn? Where have the demonstrations been? Are the protests organized? What have been responses to the many marches and other forms of demonstration and from whom? Have the protests changed over time? Ultimately, examining the protests reveal how local and isolated worries involving corn gathered enough momentum and supporters to become part of a national controversy that the country has had, and continues, to deal with.

Sources

A variety of sources were collected to analyze and chronicle the many protests in Mexico in which corn, in one form or another, seems to be at the center of. The collection of sources used included newspaper articles and publications from Mexico, newspaper articles from the United States, and even other countries. In addition to these sources, there were relevant secondary sources that helped in this research. Collectively, each of the sources allowed a historical examination of the protests throughout Mexico that have occurred over the last several years. Moreover, the sources offer insight into larger economic and political discourses in Mexico over the last three decades.

Most of the material used to examine Mexico’s protests came from major newspapers in the country, with a majority of material derived from the Reforma newspaper. Based out of Mexico City, Reforma has been a news provider to the country since 1922. According to its website, the newspaper started as a local newspaper in Monterrey titled El Sol. Throughout the twentieth century, El Sol changed its name to El Norte and, in 1993, the newspaper became
named Reforma. In recent years the paper has been labeled a conservative media outlet. With a readership of more than 276,000, Reforma has been considered a respected national newspaper in Mexico. Because Reforma had, by far, the most accessible and consistent archive of articles available, along with the fact that the newspaper has a reputation for good political coverage and is a national publication, it was utilized for this research.

There were other newspaper sources from Mexico I utilized for this research: El Universal, also a national publication with a large readership in Mexico; and, La Jornada, a leftist newspaper with a national distribution. As mentioned, Reforma provided me with the majority of articles used, but these two newspapers did provide some relevant material and supplementary articles to contrast the information from the major source. While more articles from these and other Mexican sources would have been welcomed, the availability of consistent and relevant stories and articles was quite limited within their online archives and libraries in the region. Nevertheless, these sources still provided important contributions to chronicling and examining the variety of protests that Mexicans are having related to economic and political policies that effect policies related to corn.

Other sources from outside of Mexico that also helped write this chapter. The Washington Post and BBC News, American and British news companies, respectively, both provided pertinent supplementary material for this chapter. Secondary sources, such as Tom Barry’s

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Zapata’s Revenge and Jonathan Fox’s Accountability Politics helped provide analysis and research concerning present day corn politics. Collectively, all sources provided ample information and analysis to explain how corn evolved from common grain to major concern throughout Mexico over the last three decades.

A History of Protests Related to Corn Policies in Modern Mexico

Mexico has had a history of protests concerning food security over the course of its modern history, which will be considered after the country’s revolution from 1910 to 1921. Similar to the protests to discussed at length in this chapter, popular protests before 1993 were about some of the same complaints that protestors mention today. Some of the issues involving corn were complaints over high prices, supplying enough corn for the country, producers complaining about what they feel are entitlements that they have not received from the government, and, as mentioned in the previous chapter, protection from global market conditions for the country’s producers. In sum, protests in Mexico involving corn have not been unique occurrences that have only occurred over the last three decades. There is a modern history of urban and rural groups expressing demonstrations in the country in which some aspect related to corn has been protested.

Since the end of the country’s revolution, protests in Mexican cities involving policies related to food have largely concerned prices. As detailed throughout the first chapter, urban residents tended to remain at bay, so long as prices for basic foods were affordable. The idea of supplying cheap food to city residents was regarded so highly that the PRI (Partido Revolucionario Institucional; Institutional Revolutionary Party) had policies in place throughout their reign (1934-2000) that guaranteed cheap foods, especially corn, to appease urban constituents. There were, however, episodes during which urban consumers expressed their
discontent about food prices. During the early years of Lázaro Cardenas’ tenure (1934-1940), rising food costs spurred groups like the CTM (Confederación de Trabajadores Mexicanos; Confederation of Mexican Workers) organized strikes against urban merchants. CTM’s leadership felt that merchant middlemen were hoarding grains to force price increases, and went as far as labeling merchants as “ruthless speculators” and appealed to the government to import grains to flood the market, thus lowering prices.\textsuperscript{133} During the long period of low urban prices (1950s to early 1980s) we know of no protest related to corn, but decades later, in 1989, urban groups protested President Carlos Salinas’ downsizing and restructuring of the country’s State Food Agency, which was responsible for providing with urban residents foods at subsidized prices, especially corn. Protests against the removal of subsides went so far that many women stormed the offices of the Agency to express their concern.\textsuperscript{134} It would be an exaggeration to say that protests in Mexican cities over the majority of the twentieth century were extremely common, but they did occur and were addressed.

The frequency of popular unrest concerning policies related to food in Mexico’s rural areas was quite higher than urban areas over the same period. As mentioned throughout chapter two, unrest emanating from rural areas concerned a variety of matters: government subsidies to farmers, costs of inputs for producers, levels of guaranteed prices from the government, and protection for domestic producers from global markets. In 1956, domestic producers expressed dissatisfaction with President Adolfo Ruiz Cortines when he approved the decision to import grains from the U.S. – to bring down urban prices, not by coincidence – instead of waiting for

\textsuperscript{133} Enrique C. Ochoa, \textit{Feeding Mexico: The Political Uses of Food since 1910} (Wilmington, Delaware: A Scholarly Resources Incorporated Imprint, 2000), 46.

\textsuperscript{134} Ibid. 210.
the annual harvests to finish and buy from domestic farmers.\textsuperscript{135} During the 1980s, after government-guaranteed prices to corn producers were slashed to gain economic stability after the 1982 debt crisis, peasant organizations occupied SFA offices and blocked highways to show their dissatisfaction.\textsuperscript{136} In 1987, more than 3,000 protestors, led by UELC groups (\textit{Unión de Ejidos ‘Lázaro Cardenas’; Lázaro Cardenas’ Union of Ejidos} [communal lands]), blocked an international highway and peacefully protested the slashing of government subsidies for corn farmers; fittingly, this protest was labeled the ‘Corn Strike.’\textsuperscript{137} While there were other significant popular rural protests in Mexico over its modern history, these were some of the outstanding examples.

Needless to say, protests in Mexico involving corn, or matters of contention involving the grain, are not exceptional to recent years. Popular discontent, from both urban and rural populations, concerning problems related to food and corn has been vocal and noteworthy. Moreover, there has been a political culture of mobilization in the country. This culture of mobilization has continued and, more importantly, magnified in recent decades.

\textit{Campesinos} and Mexico’s Corn Policies in the 1990s
The early 1990s was a period during which many of the protests related to corn began to emerge. More specifically, signs of Mexicans’ conflicts with corn policies started in the country’s rural areas. In the early 1990s, however, the instances of protest became far more frequent and intense than before. At the time, Mexico was emerging out of a decade

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{135} Ibid. 133.
  \item \textsuperscript{137} Jonathan Fox, \textit{Accountability Politics: Power and Voice in Rural Mexico} (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 96-97.
\end{itemize}
characterized by economic contraction, macroeconomic changes after 1982, and, finally, transition to a newer and more open economy thereafter. It was during these years of transition that Mexico’s rural population began to express discontent with the many changes occurring throughout the country. During these protests, agricultural policies related to corn gradually became common themes and thus began more complaints from the public concerning policies directly related to corn.

In 1990, President Salinas continued Mexico’s shift to a liberalized economy and lifted guaranteed prices for all agricultural products, which was not well received by small and medium-scale producers around the country. The Salinas administration also began reducing indirect farming subsidies to farmers, such as low-cost agricultural inputs and low-interest credit. These conditions gave rise to a militant group of farmers, known as the El Barzón movement, in the state of Jalisco to stage protests against the government because of what they felt was unfair abandonment by the government.\textsuperscript{138} Rising interest rates for farmers, combined with dropping agricultural prices and government cutbacks, made it difficult for small- to middle-scale farmers to maintain a living and compete against foreign agricultural imports.

On November 23, 1993, the Barzón movement began a large march from Jalisco to Mexico City. Their chief demand being that the federal government lower farming interest rates and easing the process of attaining credit; both to help farmers compete with foreign imports of corn and other products. Atop tractors, with images of the symbol Virgin of Guadalupe attached to the tractors, the protestors began their march that would culminate with them planting themselves outside of the Los Pinos presidential office in the capital and wait for an audience with President Salinas to express their concerns and demands. Although the protest involved a

\textsuperscript{138} Tom Barry, \textit{Zapata’s Revenge: Free Trade and the Farm Crisis in Mexico} (Boston, Massachusetts: South End Press, 1995), 105.
small group of participants (100 producers), its leaders promised that the demands and protests to help farmers would continue to grow. One of the march’s organizers, Maximiano Barbosa Llamas, warned that farmers from thirteen other states outside of Jalisco would join the march to the capital. In response to the beginning of the march, the outgoing governor of Jalisco called the protestors “a minority group” protesting, while the remainder of state campesinos continued working.\footnote{Jaime Barrera, “Arranca El Barzón marcha al D.F.,” Reforma, November 23, 1993, Nacional section.} The governor’s comments suggest that the protest was not taken seriously and that its participants were small rogue groups who did not represent the grievances of all agricultural workers. While the governor’s comments may have been accurate at the time, he and the rest of the country did not realize that protests coming from Mexico’s rural corn farmers were, indeed, going to become common and grow in size and frequency.

Less than two years later, in 1995, a different small group of farmers from Jalisco protested to the state. Aldo Burgarin, the spokesman for the protestors and president of the Federación Estatal de Propetarios Rural (State Federation of State Propietaries), demanded that the federal government raise the price of corn to be on par with international prices. Moreover, if the state would not raise the price per ton of corn, Burgarin threatened that the protestors would takeover government grain warehouses and prevent the sale of the grain. A more notable part of this protest of loosely organized farmers was that they threatened to join other existing rural movements, such as El Barzón and the politically known CNC (Confederación Nacional Campesina; National Peasant Confederation).\footnote{Jaime Barrera, “Exigen subir precio a maíz,” Reforma, April 4, 1995.} The frequency of protests concerning corn was at this point quite nascent and loosely organized. However, what became evident at the time was that rural groups were starting to unify and bring their appeals concerning corn to the
government. Also, the protest came at a time soon after President Ernesto Zedillo was compelled to deal with armed peasant militants from Chiapas, who, not by coincidence, took over government offices on January 1, 1994 - the exact same day the NAFTA (North American Free Trade Agreement) took effect.

Only one year later, rural groups stepped up their protests. A protest, this time numbering in the hundreds, led by *El Barzón* staged a blockade outside of the U.S. consular office in the city of Guadalajara. Again, the protest was centered on raising the price of corn to be level with international market prices. The protestors, however, were also demanding that there be a premium price for white corn, which is the corn commonly used to make tortillas, and limiting the imports of less-preferred yellow corn generally used for fodder. Shouting the words “Eat swine! This is white corn, not yellow!” the protestors proceeded to throw grains of corn and sorghum at the embassy. Furthermore, the protestors demanded that they wanted the price of corn to be equal to the higher rates established at the Chicago Mercantile Exchange (the market exchange where global agricultural process have been determined for some time). However, such an action, according to the protestors, would involve the Mexican government asking for permission to do so from the U.S., because the country’s regime was so obsequious to its powerful neighboring country.  

The protest, which was quelled peacefully, without doubt showed how complaints about corn farmers’ incomes directly involved corn, even what kinds of corn are preferred by Mexicans. It was also telling that the demonstrators tied their gripes with the U.S., perhaps to highlight anti-Yankee sentiment in sympathetic Mexicans and thus gather followers.

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In 1999, more rural unrest against the importation of corn into Mexico emerged. The governor’s home in the state of Chihuahua was invaded by hundreds of protestors on horseback. They refused to leave until the governor, Patricio Martínez, signed a manifesto, which was to be delivered to president Ernesto Zedillo a month later, composed by the protestors that forbid further imports of corn which exceeded the annual tariff free quotas stipulated in the NAFTA. According to the protestors, imported corn was too abundant and too cheap that it undercut Mexican farmers because the imports were arriving untaxed and grown far cheaper. Without hesitation, Governor Martínez promised the protestors that he would support their demands and take their complaints to the federal government. While this demonstration was not a massive show of discontent, it did illustrate how the concerns about corn in the country were not restricted to certain states like Jalisco and had moved to northern states like Chihuahua. More importantly, the protest demonstrated that, although forcibly, rural groups were gaining the attention and support of politicians for their cause.

By the late-1990s, there was an established history of protests related to corn in Mexico. The protests, however, were limited to rural areas. Moreover, the protests were never more than some hundreds of people protesting certain government policies and demanding support for the plight of small and medium farmers. Yet, as mentioned, the demonstrations became more frequent, increased in intensity, and by the end of the decade even gained promises from politicians to take their complaints to the president of the country. While the country’s corn policies mobilized only relatively small groups, it would soon grow and gain different classes of participants in the coming years.

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Throughout the 1990s, small groups of rural farmers in Mexico started the country’s corn problem centered on very unique and exceptional reasons. By the end of the decade, entirely different groups of people found reasons for mobilization that involved corn, particularly environmental groups and urban dwellers. These people, however, were not necessarily concerned with interest rates, guaranteed product prices, or the price of corn at the Chicago Mercantile Exchange. Environmentalists in Mexico were concerned about protecting the country’s corn biodiversity. Urban dwellers began to show concern for the price of tortillas, a matter they equated with the government’s inability to provide some sort of protection from international market conditions. These groups began their protests while rural protestors continued to express their grievances. Combined, the rural and environmental protestors magnified Mexico’s problems related to corn policies.

In early 1999, speculation began that imports of genetically modified corn would soon contaminate Mexico’s corn biodiversity. Greenpeace, the internationally known environmental watchdog, published a report saying that the proliferation of corn imports would eventually alter the genetic make-up of natural and traditional Mexican corn through cross-pollination. Moreover, criollo or authentic varieties of Mexican corn, which had been developed and cultivated by farmers with generations of experience, was at risk of disappearing and the country’s small farmers would be displaced. This displacement would lead to campesinos moving into urban areas, increased emigration from the country and general harm to the environment. While only small groups of people were keen to hear about Greenpeace’s report, some journalists showed concern. Yolanda Ceballos, a writer for Reforma, expressed her own opinion about the rumors of the affects of genetically modified corn saying, “For Mexico, the cultivation of transgenic corn represents an attack against our national culture that can affect the
production and further development of *teocintle* [the species of corn born and first domesticated in Mexico].”\(^{143}\) At the time, there were no signs of widespread concerns in Mexico about transgenic corn in the country and its affects, but the topic became an item of discussion in some circles and had the potential to become a larger argument.

It should be noted that while Mexicans were showing environmental concerns related to corn in 1999, there were also people in the same year that downplayed the debate. Not long after a December 8\(^{th}\) protest organized and put on by Greenpeace, some Mexicans spoke out against what they felt was irresponsible reporting and exaggeration. In a letter to a Mexican newspaper, Dr. Juan Pablo Martínez-Soriano condemned Greenpeace’s protests. Martínez-Soriano explained how “embarrassing it was for Greenpeace to misinform the public with the objective to expand its own marketing borders” and wrongfully accuse transnational companies to gain donations. Furthermore, Martínez-Soriano explained, there was no rigorous scientific evidence to support their reports.\(^{144}\) What became evident by 1999 was that Mexicans’ disagreements with policies related to corn were not entirely considered serious and cause for controversy by all circles in the country. Furthermore, there were differing opinions about how serious (or irrelevant) the complaints against transgenic products.

Within one year of the Mexican government abolishing its decades-long indiscriminate tortilla subsidies, urban consumers began to express their discontent, and urban populations, it could be said by default, became part of the country’s corn problem. In January 2000, articles started appearing in newspapers detailing the drastic increases in the price of tortillas, only one year after the tortilla industry was liberalized. According to one article, the price of tortillas went


from 3.50 pesos to 4 pesos per kilogram in the country’s Federal District, while in other states the price was as high as 5.50 pesos. These increases, according to the piece, represented a 14.3 percent increase in Mexico City and a 22 percent increase for the remainder of states. Questions of collusion and corruption amongst tortilla millers began to spread from consumers. In response to the rumors, Herminio Blanco, the country’s Secretary of Commerce, said that the price of tortillas was a private sector affair and assured concerning citizens that any findings of wrongdoing amongst millers would be prosecuted.¹⁴⁵

One day after grumblings were expressed about tortilla prices, Blanco announced that a government investigation would be launched into whether tortilla companies were unjustifiably increasing the price of tortillas. The investigation was announced in response to labor, campesino, business, and government groups complaining that increases were unprecedented and illegal. If companies were found guilty of collusion or corruption, according to Blanco, jail sentences of 3 to 10 years and economic sanctions were possible. The same article explained the size of the price increases, between 1999 and 2000, around the country: 25 percent increases in Mexico City; 50 cent increases in Chihuahua; and more than 20 percent increases in Guanajuato, Nuevo León, and Durango.¹⁴⁶

Within a week of the warnings, the Federal General Attorney’s Office in Fresnillo, Zacatecas announced sanctions against tortillerías [tortilla factories] for selling tortillas for unjustifiably high prices. Two companies were temporarily shut down. In response, Manual López González, president of the state’s Federation of State Corn and Tortilla Industries, said that prices should not involve government intervention and that the suggested 4.50 pesos price

was unstable with the costs of inputs for millers.\textsuperscript{147} While producers defended themselves against the government’s response to alleged price gouging, the Mexican government did show the wherewithal to help consumers. Moreover, the complaints involving corn from the public were strong enough that they garnered action from the government.

Complaints about tortilla prices were not involved in later protests on Aurrera University, during October 2000. Protestors wearing white overalls and masks marched on the university handing out leaflets about transgenic foods. Greenpeace, the organizer of the demonstration, accused the country’s three largest tortilla producers in Mexico – Bimbo, Maseca and Minsa – of selling tortillas that contained transgenic corn without informing the public about how little was known about possible side effects or transgenic or GM (genetically modified) products. After Gene Scan, a German research company, confirmed that each of the companies sold products containing GM corn, Greenpeace denounced the companies for their lack of transparency. Greenpeace scared enough consumers by their denunciation that many were said to have been scared and immediately started asking questions about whether other products like meat contained GM ingredients. Although the protest only garnered a small response from Bimbo, it was indicative of how the country’s general public was being further introduced to the arguments about transgenic corn and consequently showing concern.\textsuperscript{148} The episode also showed protest organizers were able to garner enough attention that Bimbo felt compelled to deliver some kind of response.

Soon after Greenpeace’s protest, Mexico’s countryside again showed that their grievances were far from over. In 2001, a relatively new group of more than 400 people, calling


themselves *Frente Nacional para la Defensa de los Productores Agropecuarios* (National Front in Defense of Agricultural and Livestock Producers), disrupted trains from the U.S. After stopping the trains in the northern border city of Ciudad Juárez, the protestors threw around intended corn imports and expressed their anger about importing agricultural products that they could easily grow.  

Less than two years later a group of *campesino* protestors called *Frente Democrático de Chihuahua* (Democratic Front of Chihuahua) disrupted hours of traffic on the international bridge between the U.S. and Mexico. United under a new banner of protest titled “*El Campo No Aguanta Mas*” (“The countryside can stand no more”), the more than 100 farmers blocked the bridge in Juárez to protest over 40 new tariff-free agricultural products entering the country in accordance with the NAFTA.  

At the time, corn was not one of the products that lost its import tariff, but the protest would serve as a preview for future protests as more and more products became entirely freely traded. The two protests, while limited to northern Mexico, showed that the country’s discords related to corn policies continued to have rural populations involved, along with environmentalists and urban residents. 

Many Mexicans, later in 2001, were shocked and dismayed when University of California, Berkeley researchers published findings in which they announced finding strains of genetically modified corn in Oaxacan cornfields. Ignacio Chapela and David Quist’s article, detailed in chapter two, essentially confirmed to many Mexicans what Greenpeace had been saying for some time. For months after the publishing of the *Nature* article, even after the journal retracted the piece on two occasions, different groups discussed how to react to the magnitude of Chapela and Quist’s findings. Debate about the validity of the article ended,

however, when the presence of transgenic corn was confirmed on April 19, 2002. Exequiel Ezcurra, president of Mexico’s National Ecological Institute, announced that between 8 and 10 percent worth of crops researched in Oaxaca and Puebla had the presence of transgenic strains. The same day of the announcement, groups began pressuring the government to immediately start a moratorium on U.S.-derived corn imports, which was where the transgenic corn was widely believed to have come from. Ezcurra was quoted as saying that protecting the country’s agricultural origins and national traditions were the responsibility of the government, and at stake were the government’s “prestige and word” of the government. Again, the government was being pressured to take action for what many people felt was a national travesty. Furthermore, the government’s legitimacy and integrity were questioned because of very specific policies related to corn.

The controversy concerning the government’s findings heated up less than a year after the government’s admission. In an interview on October 10, 2004, Michael Phillips, executive director of the U.S. Organization of Industrial Biotechnology, made the comment that the Mexican government should find it “incumbent to step up the process and reach a regulatory system that allows the country to start and accept these products [genetically modified seeds] and give the country’s agriculturalists the opportunity to choose” what they would like to grow. Needless to say, some Mexicans were not amused by Phillips’ advice to the Mexican government. Journalist Sylvia Ribeiro responded by saying that while biotechnology companies praise GM seeds for aiding provide basic foods to people all over the world, the companies’ main motivations for supplying agricultural seeds were not altruistic but opportunities for

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Ribeiro’s opinion demonstrated that the larger conflicts in Mexico with corn policies had a new group of players, multinational companies, which were attracting the ire of many Mexicans.

The beginning of 2003 witnessed an intensification of protests concerning corn around the country. Environmentalists were gathering some supporters and people sharing their worries about transgenic products, specifically corn. In urban areas, citizens were vocalizing their concern about the price of tortillas. All the while, rural groups continued to demand action from the government for their plight. Then, on January 27, 2003, a group of more than two dozen protest groups, including El Barzón, El Campo No Aguanta Mas, informed the federal government that they were turning down the government’s recent offer to discuss their grievances. Also in their exclamation was a promise that the groups would take their protest to Zócalo, in Mexico City for the entire country to see their unity and hear their complaints. If the protestors followed through on the promise, Mexico’s corn problem would no longer be local and isolated problems; it would be a subject that the country would soon know about.

Mexico’s Corn Problems Spread

On January 31, 2003, more than 50,000 people, made of entirely campesinos, staged a huge protest throughout Mexico City that culminated with demonstrations on the city’s historical plaza, the Zócalo. Their chief demand to the Mexican government: renegotiating the NAFTA. Of importance in the demanded renegotiations was the scheduled abolition of tariffs on agricultural products, especially corn (scheduled to be freely traded in 2008). More specifically,

the protestors wanted corn and beans to be excluded in traded products in the agreement. The promises that rural groups had made to the Mexican public had, indeed, been fulfilled. And, with the fulfillment of the promise, the country witnessed how serious far-reaching policies related to corn were. Moreover, city residents realized that groups other than themselves had problems related to corn and, more importantly, corn was embroiled in a rural and urban or national controversy.

Until the January 2003 protest, demonstrations had been relatively small in size. In fact, the numbers had never been more than 500 demonstrators. Also, as mentioned, the protests had been pockets of groups limited to certain locations that had different concerns related to corn. Groups from the countryside, however, showed their ability to organize and present their demands on a massive scale. The countryside also displayed their unhappiness in a very public and symbolic fashion in the Zócalo and in the country’s capital. While their demands were responded to with rhetoric and their protest did end with little legislation or recourse, it could be said that the campesino protestors inspired more disruptive overt popular discontent from other groups concerned with matters related to corn.

An example of a more disruptive method for protest occurred later in 2003. In the port city of Veracruz Greenpeace protestors chained themselves to the anchor of the Ikan Altamira, a cargo barge that was reported to leave to the U.S. in order to bring back a large shipment of transgenic corn to Mexico, reportedly products from bio-technology giant Cargill. The barge was able to leave the port, but it returned one week later with an escort by the Mexican Navy to avoid confrontation with demonstrators. The environmentally minded subset of protestors

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concerned with corn was now making overt and forceful actions, enough that the national Navy was compelled to get involved. Aside from their stated problems with transgenic corn, the protestors began a new attack on GM products, saying that they were harmful to people’s health.\textsuperscript{156}

A measurement of the public’s opinion towards GM corn was evident in a letter sent to Reforma during November 2003. In the letter, the author announced that there had been more findings of transgenic corn in states other than Oaxaca and Puebla, specifically in Chihuahua, San Luis Potosí, Morelos, Durango, Tlaxcala and Veracruz. The author also denounced the federal government’s response to the many protests concerning corn. Furthermore, according to the author, “Corn was the cultural, economic and social base of indigenous peoples, and our alimentation. However, transgenic corn was in the hands of a few transnationals [companies] that have made demands to farmers whose crops have been contaminated with their patented seeds.”\textsuperscript{157} The letter showed how the country’s corn problem now involved nationalistic, social, cultural and culinary discourses, along with the ire for transnational seed companies.

The resistance to transgenic corn’s presence in Mexico gathered more momentum throughout 2004. In Oaxaca, believed the birthplace of corn and the location where GM corn was first detected, renowned painted, Francisco Toledo led a small protest in support of criollo corn. As part of his demonstration against transnational companies’ and transgenic corn, Toledo distributed corn tortillas made from native Oaxacan corn.\textsuperscript{158} Little more than a month after Toledo’s participation in the demonstration, La Jornada published an article detailing findings of research done in the Philippines related to transgenic corn. According to the article, corn

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implanted with the famous Bt (Bacillus thuringiensis) bacterium, which was designed to resist spoiling corn from pests, specifically caterpillars, spread through pollen to neighboring communities and the incidents of allergic attacks and respiratory complications followed. In the same year, more famous artists joined the protests against transgenic corn. Some of the country’s more famous political cartoonists and artists, such as Rafael Barajas and Cintia Bolio, peacefully protested outside of the offices of the PAN (Partido Acción Nacional; National Action Party). Because the PAN was the largest supporter of a proposed law to allow transgenic crops into Mexico, protestors marched around the offices with cornstalks and makeshift corncobs painted in fluorescent colors. Barajas, as a figurative representation of the death of criollo corn, held up a painting of an ear of corn with skulls representing the grains on the ear (see Figure 1). Mexico’s transgenic corn debate was now involved in a movement that popular artists and the scientific community were joining and openly appealing towards the government to curtail.

Figure 7 Political cartoon representing the death of criollo Mexican corn, by Rafael Barajas.

160 Patricia Cordero, “Protestan moneros por transgénicos,” Reforma, November 9, 2004, Cultura section.
In 2005, many Mexicans from different backgrounds attended an exposition in Mexico City concerning the country’s array of grievances concerning corn. A sign of how much support rural corn producers was becoming was evident when Rubén Albarrán, vocalist of the famous music group Café Tacv(u)ba, spoke at the exposition. At the meeting, Albarrán offered vocal support for Mexican corn campesinos and spoke about the effects transnational companies have on native farmers. Appropriately, Albarrán said, “Yellow corn is from U.S. producers, who receive subsidies and tax benefits; this allows them to cover other markets, hurting Mexican producers.” He also praised NGOs (non-governmental organizations), such as Oxfam, for their efforts in helping the plight of Mexican farmers.\footnote{El Universal-AEE, ”Rubén Albarrán hace ¿café? con maíz nacional,” El Siglo de Torreón, November 25, 2005, Espectaculos section.} By the end of 2005, known figures from Mexico’s lo popular (Mexico’s popular culture genre) were taking part in the sustainability and rural entitlement policies related to corn. Essentially, two arms of the country’s larger conflicts involving corn policies now had the attention and support of popular artists and celebrities.

The topic of tortilla prices, which was the chief concern for the urban groups in Mexico’s, arose again throughout 2006. Urban complaints around the country became serious enough that tortilla prices became a talking point Mexico’s presidential election in 2006. Increasing prices of basic goods in urban areas, particularly tortillas and milk, were considered important enough that the two prime candidates in the election, Felipe Calderón (a PAN candidate) and Andrés Manuel López Obrador (a candidate for the Coalición por el Bien de Todos; Coalition for the Good of Everyone), were compelled to argue about the matter almost immediately after the election. Calderón was declared the winner of the close election in July, but by August Obrador, the former mayor of Mexico City, attacked Calderón for not curtailing
urban inflation, a topic he had drilled Calderón about during his election campaign. In his attack, Obrador made references to urban middle class populations and residents in lower socio-economic positions, saying inflation “hurts middle class and the most humble classes.” As mentioned in chapter one, with the rise of urban civil awareness, politicians like Obrador, who was a representative of Mexico’s National Civil Resistance Movement, parties began casting appeals to given populations over very specific points of contention. Moreover, parties found themselves crafting their alliances with civicly active populations over matters, such as consumer anxiety over tortilla prices, which could potentially gain political support.

By the end of 2006, Mexico’s many movements related to corn policies had come full circle. Protests stemming from rural populations, concerned about government aid and protection from global competition, were numbering in the tens of thousands and growing. Environmentalists throughout the country had become more active and overt, chaining themselves to ships and continuing to protest GM corn. Citizens were writing to newspapers to express their concerns about transgenic corn, and even expressing how the presence of transgenic corn had cultural, economic and nationalistic implications. Popular artists were even publicly voicing their protests and concern about different matters related to corn. Finally, tortilla prices and consequential urban concern about the topic had managed to become part of political debates and strategy.

Corn Becomes a National Spectacle

After the beginning of 2007, the various arguments concerning corn policies in Mexico collectively became a national spectacle. Protests related to state policies about corn would

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increase in magnitude, frequency and significance, after 2007. In Mexican newspapers, matters that had something to do with corn and/or tortillas became common. Foreign newspapers and media outlets also noticed Mexico’s corn problems. Also after 2007 and into 2008, signs of resistance towards the different groups of protestors became more common, reflecting new and old but heightened opinions about the protests against government policies.

During a press conference on January 13, 2007, the PRD and National Committee of Citizens in Resistance announced that three days from then there would be a series of protests around Mexico because of high tortilla prices. Ferrer Galván, leader of the League, announced that there would be coordinated marches in Chapultepec, Monterrey, Puebla, Morelos and Jalisco. In addition, Galván and the organizers called for the resignation of Calderón’s national economic chief, Eduardo Sojo, for his inability to control tortilla prices. A finale of the coordinated protests would take place on January 24th in the Zócalo. Also announced was a planned “un dia sin tortilla” (“a day without tortillas”) to take place on February 2nd, in order boycott tortillerias who were charging what they believed to be unbearable prices. In a symbol of how large and expanding Mexico’s corn problem was becoming, protestors, mainly from urban areas, had managed to coordinate networks all over the country in order to demand action from the highest levels of government and even a national day of boycott.

Within a week of the mentioned threats of protests to the administration, President Calderón signed the Agreement to Stabilize the Price of Tortillas. All circles in Mexico did not applaud the agreement and criticized protestors who had been involved in the demonstrations, however. Some people saw the pact, which placed a temporary max price on tortillas, as a deviation from liberal economic policy and caving in to public opinion. Sergio Sarmiento, in a

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two-day attack on the regime and its choice to draw up the pact were signs that the protestors were essentially scaring the regime to take unnecessary actions. First, he said that the government made preemptive decisions to continue the prohibition on planting transgenic corn, which was the most significant stipulation in the moratorium against transgenic corn, by not running its own tests concerning transgenic corn. Moreover, according to Sarmiento, Mexico had lost its scientific pioneering courage it had during the Green Revolution. The next day, Sarmiento called the pact a complete political strategy by Calderón and his administration, saying that the pact was made to gather popular sentiment at the time, because public opinion of his effectiveness against the country’s drug trafficking problems had faded. He also suggested that the pact would, in fact, stabilize prices, which was politically significant in the eyes of citizens, but that more would needed to be done to get tortilla industry operating efficiently.

Within a week of the agreement and Sarmiento’s articles, the magnitude of the tortilla protestors could be seen. For the first time in recent Mexican history, the Unión Nacional de Trabajadores (UNT; National Worker’s Union), Frente Sindical Mexicano (Mexican Union Front), and the Congreso del Trabajo (CT; Congress of Labor), united to confront the government about the prices of basic goods. Historically, the three parties tended to not work with one another and operate under differing agendas. However, the success of the movement to change tortilla prices united the groups, who had at least 116 syndicates under their organizational umbrellas, brought them together to demand that the 8.50 pesos per kilogram cap on tortillas be reexamined. The groups also announced that they had invited the CTM to join their protest. In a final threat to the government, the unions announced that if the government

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164 Sergio Sarmiento, “Revolución verde,” Reforma, January 18, 2007, Jaque Mate section.
did not want more “Oaxacas” or “Atencos,” both scenes of recent massive protest against the government, “they [government] would have to respond to the general discontent” created by tortilla prices.\footnote{Patricia Muñoz, Matilde Pérez, Antonio Castellanos, Ciro Pérez, and Víctor Ballinas, “El tortillazo une a centrales obreras en torno a protestas y movilizaciones,” \textit{La Jornada}, January 23, 2007.}

With threats of a massive protests toward the government abound and political maneuvering happening, some Mexicans continued to express their worries about the issue of tortilla prices throughout the country. In a reflection by Mauricio González, the Mexican government warned that talk of reverting back to government subsidies on corn and tortillas was like opening an irreversible “Pandora’s box which cost much effort and decades to close.” González did admit that because global prices of corn were increasing, action would have to be taken on the part of the state, but indiscriminant subsidies would be unwise. He finishes his article by saying that the country would see if it could be persuaded by social protests and if the demonstrations would send the country back towards leftist policies, because for protestors, the demands were either “subsidies or suicide.”\footnote{Mauricio González, “Subsidio o suicidio,” \textit{Reforma}, January 31, 2007, Reflexiones section.}

As previously planned and well known, Mexicans from all circles walked in protest on January 31, 2007, in what was the largest show of discontent and concern related to corn. Throughout the entire day, citizens marched through downtown Mexico City demanding lower prices on basic food products, specifically tortilla prices, and changes in economic policy. About 75,000 Mexicans, which included trade unionists and farmers, marched through the city holding signs in protest. One banner read “Calderon stole the elections, and now he’s stealing the tortillas.” Other people waved around flat corn disks and chanted “Tortillas si, Pan no!” which was a play on words related to Calderón’s party. Farmers in the crowd expressed their
discontent and fear about corn becoming a freely traded item, according to scheduled clauses in the NAFTA, in less than a year. In a press release during the massive protest, Calderón promised would clamp down on hoarding and speculation from tortilla and corn retailers.168

The day after the nationally known protest, Reforma published the results of its own survey concerning the protest. According to the survey: 1 in every 5 Mexicans had reduced their tortilla consumption because of prices; 63 percent of people surveyed said that tortillas were a part of their daily diet; 75 percent of the lowest income level said that tortillas were their basic food.169 In the same edition of Reforma, Obrador was quoted as saying thank you to all the participants in the demonstration and groups who helped organize it. He also reiterated his appeals to the government to raise salaries for workers, increase guaranteed prices to domestic farmers, and rescind the clause in the NAFTA that was scheduled to make corn and beans freely traded commodities.170 The large protest demonstrated, again, Mexicans’ proclivity to openly demand action from its government and civically organize on a grand-scale, with government policies related to corn being utilized as reasons to express discontent and unrest.

Still in the aftermath of the large protest, Enrique Canales wrote a strong opinion concerning transgenic corn in Mexico. In the article, Canales tells readers that the idea that the cultivation of genetically modified corn will somehow alter Mexican identity or that transgenic corn is not as good as native, non-modified corn is an “ideological fantasy.” Canales makes


strong arguments for the use of transgenic corn by praising the production levels of GM corn and accused radical groups, such as Greenpeace, of creating hysteria in consumers. Moreover, Canales says that the absolute refusal to grow transgenic corn prevented campesinos from capitalizing on opportunities to modernize the country’s agricultural sector and its available soil with new technology. Finally, Canales suggested, cheapening transgenic corn would allow campesinos and the country to “emerge from the ideological shell of the past that keeps us in its poverty.”

The article served as proof that not all Mexicans were in favor of preserving criollo corn and believed transgenic corn was so much a problem, and, in fact, a solution.

Despite the stabilization plan signed by President Calderón and the continuance of discussions concerning corn and tortillas in Mexico, tortilla prices quickly rose above the agreed upon price ceiling. Within three months of the pact, it was reported that the national average price of tortillas was above the 8.50 pesos per kilogram maximum. In some cities the average price was far higher than the 8.50 pesos per kilogram price; Mexicali at 11.8 pesos, Hermosillo at 11.25 pesos, Chetumal at 10 pesos, Cuernavaca at 9.85 pesos and 9.75 pesos in Acapulco. The pact to stabilize prices, which was not a legally binding agreement between the government and tortilla companies, was, according to companies, effective at temporarily helping consumers, but would not last because of international corn prices. While threats to protest from consumers did not follow these findings, the quick rise in prices reflect how temporary and ineffective the pact was, and how little could be done on the part of the government to help consumers. Consequently, the proliferation of prices also showed that what could be called Mexico’s “corn conflict” was not going away in the near future.

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In the middle of 2007, the president of the CNC denounced a deal that would allow for the collection of native corn varieties for possible preservation in germoplasm banks. Heladio Ramírez, CNC president and PRI senator, said that a deal made between Monsanto, the world’s largest biotechnology company, and the National Confederation of Mexican Corn Producers was an irresponsible act. Ramírez defended corn producers’ right to evolve and adopt new technologies to help their industries. However, he also added that making a deal with Monsanto to help with the collection of native seeds was a step towards the introduction of transgenic seeds that he felt needed more conclusive scientific evidence of their effects. Moreover, the CNC, which was the umbrella organization of the National Confederation of Mexican Corn Producers, could not support the deal. In response, Efraín García Bello, president of the National Confederation, said he doubted the government would offer resources in the effort to collect native seeds and added that Monsanto was the only respondent to the calls for a meeting concerning the preservation project.¹⁷³

This episode offers some insight to the evolving nature of the protests and unrest with Mexicans’ discord with corn policies. The fact that the two affiliated organizations differed in opinions is not entirely significant. However, the concept that corn producers were open to the idea of working with biotechnology companies – albeit because they felt government help was out of the question – shows that some rural farmers and campesinos may simply be concerned with keeping their jobs and not necessarily continuing to “save” criollo corn. Moreover, the incident reveals that larger, politically inclined organizations, such as the CNC, may have been more concerned with political posturing in the eyes of its constituents, while the actual corn farmers may simply be worried about being able to make a living. Finally, the episode suggests

that transnational companies were open to working with producers, which, if the purchasing of GM products was not involved in the project, begs the question of what were Monsanto’s real motivations for investing money in preserving seeds.

Environmentalists and other groups against the use of transgenic corn earned what could have been called a symbolic or moral victory in August 2007. With the support of Environmental Secretary, Martha Delgado, actual cornstalks were planted throughout Mexico City. As a symbol of the city’s attempts to become “greener,” the city said that it would plant more trees around the city, along with native milpas (cornfields). Present at the announcement and applauding the efforts were Mexican celebrities Vanessa Bauche, Demián Bichir and Manuel Bernal. Also supportive of the initiative were Greenpeace and a relatively new organization calling itself “Sin maíz no hay país” (“Without corn, there is no country”). Not only does the event show that the government continued to notice the complaints involving corn, it also showed that the varying sides involved in the tensions related to corn policies could make peace with small gestures such as the planting of cornstalks.

Only a couple months after the thawing in the tensions concerning corn in Mexico, campesinos began 2008 with a reminder that their grievances were far from satisfactorily dealt with. On the same day that corn and beans became freely traded products, according to stipulations in the NAFTA, thousands of rural groups coordinated demonstrations around the country and promised to continue to increase the amount of future protests. Again, the international bridge between El Paso, Texas and Ciudad Juárez was taken over by protestors, forbidding any trucks carrying shipments of corn and beans. In Cuernavaca, El Barzón and other groups also staged mass protests. Warnings from rural groups were also declared that further

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174 Ariadna Bermeo, “Quiere el Gobierno crear una ciudad de milpas,” Reforma, August 6, 2007, Ciudad y Metrópoli section.
protests, including ones outside the U.S. embassy and another in Mexico City’s Zócalo, could be expected unless efforts were made to amend the clauses in the NAFTA. As promised, thousands of *campesinos* marched around the capital city on tractors and horses, and cows and *sombreros* (typical hats belonging to Mexican farmers) and thousands of other people participated in coordinated protests around the country. Collectively, the two protests in the same month highlighted to people that the country’s corn controversy was not going away, especially in the eyes of rural populations.

In a twist of sorts, on the same day of the massive protests in Mexico City and other locations, other groups of farmers marched in Chihuahua demanding that they be allowed to cultivate transgenic corn seeds. Led by Armando Villarreal and more than 500 other producers, the protestors openly said that transgenic corn already had a presence in Mexico, and forbidding their cultivation left farmers at a disadvantage against neighboring North American producers. Explaining the burning of a tractor during the protest, Villarreal said that the “countryside is fuming.” While the protest did end peacefully, it again revealed that unlike Greenpeace, some well-known Mexican artists and other Mexicans, some rural groups are not abhorred with the idea of GM corn being grown and that the country’s corn problem was quite dynamic.

In relations to the grievances connected to corn in Mexico, the remainder of 2008 was relatively similar to years past. There were no massive protests, but the complaints and opinions from varying angles related to corn in Mexico sounded familiar. In an article published in July, Adriana Alatorre discussed efforts being made by the government protecting native genetic

strains, specifically that at least 60 percent of native strains would be registered as intellectual properties by 2025. Later in 2008, Greenpeace continued its efforts to forbid transgenic corn from further contaminating Mexican corn in a peaceful December demonstration outside of the presidential mansion in Mexico City. Less than a week after the environmentalists’ protest, Sergio Sarmiento continued his attacks on environmentalists and other against working with transgenics. Echoing past arguments, Sarmiento said that the country’s unwillingness to at least try experimenting with modern technological advancements in the countryside was “one of the principle causes of its poverty.”

Throughout 2007 and 2008 Mexicans’ arguments involving corn policies had evolved into a larger polarizing but well-known situation. During both years, there were massive protests that involved traditional and new players in the arguments concerning corn. Trade unions, national politicians, transnational companies, and even artists became involved in the affairs. The highest levels of government were compelled to act to quell some of the protests. This short but active period also showed how arguments and discussions concerning corn in Mexico began changing; different groups, such as the CNC, National Confederation of Mexican Corn Producers, began divisions in their individual stances about corn. Moreover, some citizens, such as Sarmiento and Canales, made convincing arguments against different protestors, thus revealing that sympathy does not entirely rest with campesinos and urban consumers, and that the government is not entirely reviled by the public.

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180 Sergio Sarmiento, “Nuestro maíz,” Reforma, December 26, 2008, Jaque Mate section.
Conclusions

Studying and analyzing the protests concerning connected to corn and tortilla policies in Mexico offer significant conclusions about the country’s known corn problem. Chronicling the protests and demonstrations do not tell corn’s history in modern Mexico. However, examining the various protests, does explain how complaints involving corn have managed to become part of larger discussions related to economic policies, environmental matters, arguments over progress and modernization, politics, culture, and nationalism. Detailing the development of protests involving corn show the many disputes and arguments have been a process, how varied the different complaints involving corn and tortilla policies are, how corn is simply not a grain to Mexicans and, up until 2008, changes were difficult to come by in the struggles related to corn.

The first conclusion that can be drawn from the study of protests concerning corn in Mexico is that the country’s “corn conflict” was an evolution that almost by chance turned into today’s problematic corn situation. What started during the early 1990s in the countryside involving handfuls of unhappy farmers loosely organized by groups, such as El Barzón, gradually turned into coordinated protests around the country. Environmentalists, urban consumers, higher-level politicians, trade unions, supporters of GM products, and other players in what today is a large collection of conflicts with corn policies were not involved in the situation during the early-1990s. However, as economic policies in the country were newly enacted, politics changed, a number of contingencies occurred, and different actors found ways to get involved, the national “corn crisis” evolved. Then, in early 2007, in what was the largest and most united sign of protest related to corn, the country saw the magnitude of the situation. And, today, Mexico’s complaints associated with corn policies continue to evolve and become part of larger discussions in the country.
Looking at the different protests also shows how diverse groups with different motivations and agendas have found some way of gathering around problems related to corn. For many campesinos, corn was a product that they began protests about because they felt they were entitled to certain things from the government after subsidies were abolished and guaranteed prices decreased. Their complaints have today splintered into groups who would like to be able to plant transgenic corn, other factions who want trade protection for their products, and some groups who want to protect their country’s historic genetic corn variability. Environmental groups have a different agenda that essentially involves simply forbidding agricultural products produced with cutting-edge biotechnology from the country. Urban residents are united under the banner of high tortilla prices, which they equate with ineffectual governing and less than desired economic policies. Tortilla prices found ways to become a political matter, with Andrés Manuel López Obrador and trade unions using the subject of high prices as fodder to criticize the PAN administration and gain supporters. In addition to these different groups and their varying agendas, there are also popular figures that have different attractions to the grievances associated with corn policies, such as Rubén Albarrán and his support for campesinos, or artists and their political cartoons related to cultural aspects involving corn. Together, the different groups and their varying agendas have found common ground in Mexico’s “corn conflict.”

The popular unrest stemming from corn in Mexico also shows how fundamental corn is to the country’s people. For farmers, corn is far from solely a grain to be harvested, eaten and marketed. For other groups, such as urban tortilla consumers, environmentalists and popular artists, corn represents a valued culinary ingredient, piece of their ancient culture and a fundamental part of their identity as Mexicans. Thus the protests related to corn could be
considered defense of a fundamental piece of the country’s historical narrative or reactions to a “resignification” of corn. Mexicans are dealing with corn becoming integrated into a generalized agricultural market system and what this could mean the grain’s significance in the country. Moreover, people are dealing with the changes of significance of criollo corn as the technological and social terrains in Mexico and the world change.

A final and telling conclusion that can be drawn from studying the protests in Mexico is that changes have been few and ineffectual. For producers, guaranteed prices and subsidies have not returned, corn remains a freely traded product, and other neoliberal economic policies started in the early 1980s have relatively remained in place. Moreover, producers are still not allowed to plant transgenic corn and, as some of them believe, fairly compete with global producers. Although GM corn has been confirmed in Mexico and environmental groups continue their protests, imports of transgenic corn continue to enter the country. Urban consumers received some relief with the stabilization pact, but, as evidenced only months after early 2007 and in Chapter 1, prices quickly increased and look to keep increasing to levels not seen in decades. Also, despite the growth of a more civic society in cities, politicians have offered little more than sympathy and ineffective responses to urban grievances. In essence, much has been discussed and argued, but monumental changes have not occurred.

Demonstrations and protests related to corn around the country over the last two decades have together created an array of complaints from the public. Various protests somehow involving corn in Mexico collectively tell a story that involves politics, economics, civics, traditions, the environment, culture and nationalism. The protests show how what started as complaints from the countryside became part of what today is a national conflict with corn policies that has involved a number of groups with a variety of agendas and wants. Also, the
protests demonstrate that meaningful changes in response to the protests have been tough to notice and difficult to attain. The persistent history of protests demanding meaningful changes to resolve Mexico’s many complaints associated with corn also underline how rapidly the grain’s symbolism and significance to Mexicans is reemerging.
CONCLUSIONS

Throughout Mexican history the saying, “Sin maíz, no hay país,” (“There is no country without corn”) has been regarded as truth in literal and figurative senses. This is because corn’s place in the country’s narrative has been more than simply being an ingredient for making tamales or a grain grown for profit. For many Mexicans, corn has been considered a cultural artifact and a key component to their national identity, which they collectively value. However, over recent decades, discussions related to corn have changed because of economical and political dynamics. Different groups, such as discontented urban consumers, concerned farmers and environmentalists, have been mobilized because of different policies related to corn and have managed to make discussions concerning the grain to be problematic and even controversial. The evolution of the changes related to corn was discussed throughout Chapters 1 through 3. From this evolution, three important conclusions can be made concerning Mexico and corn.

The first and most significant conclusion that can be made is that right now there is recentralization of corn in Mexico. Mexicans from different backgrounds and with different grievances have been galvanized to “protect” corn, and have found methods for using corn to express complaints concerning larger and more abstract topics. In urban areas, citizens managed to use the topic of high tortilla prices to show discontent with the government and question their ability and legitimacy to govern. Rural groups, particularly small and medium-sized farmers, are utilizing the removal of corn subsidies and former entitlements that they used to receive to express not only discontent with the government, but to show evidence of what neoliberal economic, and thereby political policies, effect their livelihoods. Environmental groups and other concerned with protecting Mexico’s corn genetic variety have used what is happening to corn to gain a political voice against transnational companies and technology. In essence, the
Mexican people have been collectively, although not by design, remaking corn important to the country. While the history of how corn became important to Mexican identity and how its importance was maintained has been well documented, this thesis demonstrates the unraveling of these processes and how people, and not a hegemonic political entity, are reinstalling corn’s centralization.

The fact that the Mexican people have been agents for the recentralization of corn in Mexico is significant, when compared to what historiography concerning corn and Mexico are compared to what is happening today. Jeffrey Pilcher made the point that throughout the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century the government tried a variety of methods to convince people of the superiority of wheat over corn. Shortly after the Mexican Revolution, however, the government was compelled to accept the fact that Mexicans were, as Pilcher said, *hombres de maíz*, and thereafter corn was an undeniable part of the country’s identity. Moreover, the government understood that corn’s cultural and nutritional importance to the country could not be ignored. Thus, controlling the political discourses concerning corn could be used to maintain or gain legitimacy.

Enrique Ochoa proved that since 1910 the Mexican government, under the control of the PRI (*Partido Revolucionario Institucional*; Institutional Revolutionary Party), found made providing food security to its constituents a key part of its “hegemonic package.” A key strategy to providing food security involved manipulating urban food markets, which absolutely included the price of corn and tortillas, to provide cheap food to its urban supporters. Providing food security also involved ensuring that countryside farmers received what they felt were fair prices for their products, such as corn, even if it meant paying more for domestic prices than international prices. Realizing how important corn was to the Mexican people, the PRI created
policies that ensured that they could control and manipulate the political use of corn. And the PRI’s strategy was successful; they were the ruling party for decades.

The shift that Mexico took after the early-1980s, however, began changes to the political landscape in the country. More specifically, the shift towards more neoliberal economic policies began what could be called the beginning of corn’s decentralization in Mexico. Adopting neoliberalism involved far more than easing corn tariffs and allowing the market to decide food prices. According to neoliberal policies, a state has to be willing to enact and enforce *laissez faire* government policies, which meant that the PRI would have to change its history of policies of food security. Consequently, this also meant that the PRI gradually surrendered control of the political discourses concerning corn in the country. Corn was no longer a “protected” and important political tool. Then, in the early-1990s, when Mexico began removing state sponsored subsidies and signing agreements to phase out all tariffs on corn imports, corn truly became a product subject to be part of transnational trade, global prices, and the importation of transgenics. This process began under the PRI’s reign and has intensified with the election of the more market-friendly PAN (*Partido Acción Nacional*; National Action Party). However, as evidenced throughout the previous chapters, the Mexican people have been taking progressively more organized and overt actions to remind the government that corn is important to them and seen as an essential to their national and cultural identity.

The second conclusion stemming from this thesis involves the reaction to Mexican people trying to recentralize corn. More specifically, the lack of genuine and permanent reaction on the part of the government is important and telling. Chapter 3 discussed how recently any meaningful policies to curtail the plight of urban consumers and deal with the other protests involving corn have been absent. However, this lack of action on the government’s behalf is
indicative of how what has been happening to corn in Mexico for some decades. Since the 1980s, Mexico has only entrenched itself further in neoliberal policies, and with the election of a known laissez faire-leaning party, the further integration into these policies has intensified. In other words, corn’s centralization in Mexican identity has been undergoing unwanted, in much of the public’s eyes, change and the process has garnered little to no consequential reform. As mentioned, corn has simply become a product under neoliberalism, a fact that the Mexican government has done nothing to alter.

Finally, this thesis demonstrates that the diverse protests related to corn have not been a unified, united movement. Instead, the variety of protests has been quite scattered and exceptional. While the protests have revolved around government policies related to corn, any signs of a larger, mobilized movement to resolve Mexico’s corn problems have not been present. The different groups protesting one matter related to corn or another have been largely motivated to only protest their own complaints. With the exception of the January 2007 massive protest in Mexico City, when urban consumers, rural farmers and environmentalists marched, the protests have been separate incidents with little relations to other protests. For example, the farmer protests in Guadalajara were exclusively marching for themselves, not as part of another, such as anti-transgenics, or larger effort. Nonetheless, the protests involving corn collectively amount to matters that Mexicans continue to become aware of and that the government will continue to be compelled to deal with.

Discussions mentioning corn throughout Mexican history have changed over the last three decades. This is because corn is no longer simply a ubiquitous nutritional ingredient or nationalistic emblem. Over the course of the last three decades, economic and political frameworks have compelled people to make policies related to corn sources of discord and have
mobilized thousands of people. While protestors’ complaints have been answered by little change and inaction on the part of the government, various stratified groups from different sectors with different grievances continue to express discontent. All the while, these protestors – the public – continue to recentralize corn’s importance to their country’s identity and culture, and remind people that, particularly in Mexico, *Sin maíz, no hay país.*
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## APPENDIX A. WAGES

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