

# Corn, Markets, and Mobilization in Mexico

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When, where, and how do people mobilize to oppose market reforms? When people do mobilize, why do mobilizations take the forms they do? These questions have been the focus of social science scholarship for more than thirty years, yet little consensus has emerged. Should we expect, as Polanyi famously argued in the 1940s, the emergence of a “double movement”—a movement to protect citizens from the effects of unregulated markets?<sup>1</sup> Or, should we expect to see the disorganizing and/or weakening of social movements and civil society organizations in response to market-oriented economic policies?<sup>2</sup> Protests over rising tortilla prices in Mexico in January 2007 offer an excellent lens through which to investigate these questions. Mobilizations lasted only a month but they drew on multiple sectors of Mexican society. This article asks: How do we understand the broad-based, widespread composition of the *tortillazo* protests? What are the implications of these protests for our understanding of the relationships between market reforms and social mobilization?

The events in Mexico suggest that far from disorganizing, weakening, or atomizing civil society organizations, marketization can work to create social mobilizations that bridge long-standing cleavages. To understand when and where this might happen, we need to take a more nuanced approach to questions about the links between markets and mobilization. To understand how and why markets might work to produce broad-based, widespread political resistance in some times and not others, we must understand the context in which markets operate and the meanings that marketization takes on.<sup>3</sup>

## **The Case and the Argument**

On January 31, 2007, thousands of Mexicans filled the Zócalo in Mexico City to express opposition to rising corn prices and corn imports. Farmers drove tractors from Aguascalientes and Puebla, union members came on buses from as far as the Yucatán in the east and Chihuahua in the north, and residents of the city itself came out to join them. The price of tortillas had risen dramatically across the country; in some regions, prices had quadrupled since the summer. The price increases were arguably caused

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

While the protests were neither the first nor the most dramatic instance of popular resistance to market reforms in Mexico, they offer a unique opportunity to explore political mobilization in response to markets. The *tortillazo* protests brought *campesinos*, union members, other civil society organizations, and political leaders from every major party together around a common concern.<sup>4</sup> The movement brought together individuals across occupational and regional divides and despite internal squabbles. The cooperation that January was largely without precedent in the Mexican context.

This article explains the broad-based appeal of the 2007 *tortillazo* protests. The mobilizations dominated national headlines for only a month, yet attention to this single, short-lived episode of contention helps us explore the conditions under which broad-based, widespread resistance to markets might be possible. It also tells us much about conceptions of communal belonging and how those conceptions might clash with the politics and policies of a neoliberal state. In doing so, analysis of this case creates new possibilities for theorizing about the intersection of markets and processes of social mobilization.

The scholarship on mobilization in the face of neoliberal reforms is significant;<sup>5</sup> however, variation across time and policy areas—as well as within countries—remains under explored. Even for scholars who focus on particular types of marketization, the *tortillazo* protests defy expectations. If, as Andy Baker finds, free trade is widely popular throughout Latin America, how should we understand the protests in response to the tortilla crisis?<sup>6</sup> Scholarship on the relationship between social unrest and food prices sheds some light on the question, but by focusing our attention on regime type and subsidy patterns, these studies overlook the ways in which culture shapes policies and responses to them.<sup>7</sup> The *tortillazo* protests demonstrate the contingent and conditional character of popular responses to market reforms in general,<sup>8</sup> and to volatile food prices in particular.

## Central Claims

This article argues that we can best explain the emergence of a broad-based movement during the *tortillazo* by understanding the ways in which the perceived vagaries and vicissitudes of the market interacted with corn’s meanings in the Mexican context. The ways in which corn symbolizes community help us to understand the alliances that emerged. To threaten corn is to threaten family and nation in ways that threatens to other

basic foods do not. Many understand corn to be critical to life and livelihood. It symbolizes both the imagined community of the Mexican nation and the quotidian communities of family and neighborhood.<sup>9</sup> To explain why so many different organizations came together during the *tortillazo* and why their message resonated so widely, we must look to the ways corn as perceived material necessity and as symbol are intertwined in the Mexican context and how these meanings intersect with expectations of the state, communities, and markets. When markets created perceived insecurities around access to corn—when individuals imagined that they or other Mexicans might not be able to consume a good at the center of daily life and imaginings of nation—unexpected alliances formed, and people voiced opposition in the streets. A threat to corn heightened expressions of national belonging by creating perceptions that what it means to be Mexican might be at risk.<sup>10</sup>

These understandings created opportunities for unique political alliances; corn's role in Mexican culture enabled a variety of political actors from across the spectrum to join forces. An activist affiliated with a *campesino* organization remarked, "Corn is a *tema aglutinador* [theme that ties things together]. We are all made with a base of corn. We knew there was incredible potential to bring all of Mexico together in a fight against so many years of neoliberal technocrats."<sup>11</sup> *Campesino*, labor, and other civil society organizers were undoubtedly acting opportunistically. But as the preceding quote shows, these acts of opportunism were only possible because of the ways in which corn took on meanings for a variety of different groups in Mexico. Crafty social movement entrepreneurs were able to take advantage of the opportunity that a threat to corn created.

### Corporatist Legacies, Mobilizing Frames, and Cultures of Corn

Mainstream social movement concepts do much to advance our understanding of the events surrounding the *tortillazo*.<sup>12</sup> The movement relied heavily on available resources, took advantage of existing opportunity structures, and deftly employed frames.<sup>13</sup> Central to movement organizers' ability to mobilize so many people so quickly were the legacies of a politics of "inclusionary corporatism."<sup>14</sup> For over seventy years, Mexico's labor, peasant, and popular sectors were directly integrated into the *Partido Revolucionario Institucional* (PRI)—Mexico's ruling party—through over-arching federations that penetrated deeply into Mexican civil society.<sup>15</sup> When independent labor and *campesino* organizations began to emerge in the 1970s and 1980s, they created new opportunities for social mobilization and challenged traditional corporatist organizations to adapt to a changing political climate.

However, corporatist legacies were not so easily dismantled. Independent organizations drew on the pre-existing formal sectoral networks and organizations for much of their strength. Even the PRI's defeat in the 2000 presidential elections did little to re-shape the fundamental dynamics of corporatist-style political organization and participation.<sup>16</sup> During the *tortillazo*, independent unions and *campesino* organizations played prominent roles—both in mobilizing their own members and issuing the calls

to protest that brought unaffiliated consumers to the streets. However, the mobilizational know-how and structure that developed over decades of corporatist rule, as well as the legacy of a culture of sectoral political participation, helped to create a strong foundation on which these new organizations could draw.

Yet, even as the legacy of corporatist incorporation helped to enable large-scale participation in the *tortillazo* protests, it cannot explain the broad-based, widespread composition of the movement. Independent *campesino* organizations had been plagued by internal divides, and urban union and *campesino* organizations often found themselves at odds on policy issues. Furthermore, the cross-sectoral horizontal ties evidenced during the *tortillazo* showed a capacity to overcome the sectoral isolation that was a hallmark of the PRI's corporatist strategies. The strong mobilizing structures in place in 2007 played a critical role in bringing people to the streets, but they cannot answer the question at the core of this article: why did we see such extensive cross-sectoral, cross-party collaboration when it came to protesting rising corn and tortilla prices in January 2007?

Attention to mobilizing frames helps to answer the question. Calls to defend national patrimony and heritage functioned as powerful master frames and played an important role in bridging divides and mobilizing across classes and sectors.<sup>17</sup> These frames explain the broad-based appeal of the movement and the participation of previously unorganized communities in particular.

Even so, attention to frames alone misses a critical piece of the story. We must understand why and how the frames worked as they did. Why were such powerful master frames available to this particular movement at this particular moment, and why did they resonate so broadly? Why were political actors with diverse individual agendas able to rally their constituencies to work together when corn was at stake? To answer these questions, we must look to what corn means in the Mexican context and how those meanings interacted with the perceived vulnerabilities created by markets.

There is no single mythology of corn in Mexico. Corn has multiple meanings throughout the country—meanings that coexist within individual people, cities, and towns, as well as within the borders of the Mexican nation-state. The variety of stories and legends, symbols and sayings related to corn in Mexico is overwhelming. The thread that connects them is that they make corn a symbol of *lo mexicano*, which translates loosely to “the Mexican way.” Corn has been mythologized and ritualized in a variety of ways. Contemporary scholarship suggests that corn was first developed in Mexico; the grain has been placed squarely at the core of contemporary conceptions of Mexican heritage. It also figures prominently in Mayan and Mexica mythology—man is literally forged from corn in the *Popol Vuh*, a Mayan myth of creation.<sup>18</sup> Furthermore, urban and rural practices revolve around the production and consumption of corn; both the cornfield and the tortilla are simultaneously revered and derided as emblematically Mexican.

But while corn may signify different things to different people in different times and places, there is the sensibility that, across the country, it is imbued with special meaning. This knowledge that corn is revered has made the grain into a national symbol—a tie that brings together a political community of more than 40 million people and spans more

than 760,000 square miles. For many Mexicans, corn has come to mean “Mexico”; it is deeply imbricated in understandings of Mexican family life and serves as a foundation for perceptions of communal belonging. An analysis of the discourse and symbols deployed by protest leaders and participants, as well as the media and other analysts during the *tortillazo*, shows how these meanings powerfully shaped political resistance.

## Data and Methods

This article is a product of interpretive historical and ethnographic research. These approaches are particularly appropriate for addressing the questions at hand for two reasons. First, through interpretive research I hoped to be able to understand what particular actions, words, or other symbols might mean to the Mexicans with whom I interacted. Second, I could “avoid individualist assumptions about the logics of collective action and instead treat actors as socially embedded,”<sup>19</sup> allowing me to explore how family and nation were constructed and how rising corn prices might be perceived as a threat to them.

I conducted fieldwork in Mexico during the winter, spring, and summer of 2009. The analysis is based largely on research in Mexico City where I conducted formal interviews with over one hundred protest participants, community leaders, and government officials. I identified interviewees through newspaper reports and other publications as well as “snowball” sampling, whereby an interview with one individual would yield connections to one or more others. In addition, I spoke with local residents about corn and observed practices of consumption, cultivation, and celebration. I participated in daily life by taking part in social gatherings, political events, and protests. I observed formal meetings and workshop sessions; read newspapers; went to plays, concerts, and movies; and watched local television. These experiences gave me the tools to make sense of particular actions or words in the context in which they took place or were deployed.

Historical research involved analysis of written materials including regional and national newspapers, local and national television coverage, primary source documents (e.g., movement declarations, petitions, and pamphlets), and scholarly works.<sup>20</sup> I relied heavily on video clips of the movement’s activities or other relevant events as well as photographs taken by private observers and photojournalists. My observations of lived experiences in 2009 helped me interpret these earlier texts and understand the work that particular words or phrases may have been doing in movement slogans. While I was not in Mexico during the *tortillazo*, I drew on experiences living and working in the country in 1994, 1998, and 2001. These experiences shored up claims about the ways in which corn produces conceptions of Mexican-ness.

## Domesticity and Nation

The home—a critical place for the production and reproduction of Mexican national belonging—was one of the central sites of perceived vulnerability during the *tortillazo*.

Corn-based foods, whether prepared at home or consumed on the streets, have become a critical ingredient in perceptions of *lo mexicano*.<sup>21</sup> During the protests, domestic concerns intersected powerfully with a sense of national belonging, as it was not simply “my family” but also “Mexican families” that were understood to be at risk.

The first signs of the mobilizing power of connections between domesticity and tortillas appeared soon after the price hikes began. As Calderón traveled to the states of Mexico and Veracruz in early January, angry residents greeted him. On the streets of Chalco in the state of Mexico, groups of women welcomed Calderón with shouts of “*¡Que baje la tortilla!* [That tortillas come down!]” “*¡y la leche!* [and milk!].” In Veracruz, housewives met Calderón with signs and chants: “*¡Sí a la tortilla, no al PAN!* [Yes to tortillas, no to the PAN/bread]” and “*¡soberanía ya!* [Sovereignty now!].” They demanded the return of *tortibonos* (tortilla subsidies) and the end of corn flour monopolies.<sup>22</sup>

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

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

These calls also register at the national level. Domestic practices cannot be pried apart from conceptions of, and desires for, national belonging. The family kitchen is one of the places in which nationalism is produced and the nation brought into being.<sup>23</sup> Family and nation work together to make a threat to tortillas more than a financial hardship. Furthermore, high corn and/or tortilla prices implied that officials entrusted

to manage the Mexican state could not control something of critical importance. The references suggest both that Mexico should not have to rely on foreign markets for its supply of corn and that it should not simply accept market prices for something as critical to the nation as corn. A *campesina* woman who had traveled in from Morelos to march on January 14 invoked both of these expectations in an interview two years later. “Corn,” she claimed, “has maintained us in our families, it has maintained us in our communities ... we have to defend corn because through defending it we defend our autonomy and independence.”<sup>24</sup> Her defense of corn simultaneously defends individual autonomy and independence—her personal ability to purchase the foods she wants to cook and consume—and that of the imagined community of the Mexican nation. Sovereignty—of both family and nation—was at stake.

The reference to milk—“*¡Que baje la tortilla!* [That tortillas come down!]” “*¡y la leche!* [and milk!]”—in these early protests is particularly illustrative of the mobilizing power of a market-driven threat to tortillas and how tortillas worked to symbolize the intersection of family and nation, whereas milk did not. According to the 2005 National Survey of Household Income and Spending, 6 percent of spending in an “average” Mexican household was dedicated to tortillas.<sup>25</sup> Whereas this surpasses many other oft-consumed items (e.g., sugar, fruit, eggs, and chicken), it is roughly on par with average spending on milk. A similar percentage increase in milk and tortilla prices should have a similar material impact on household spending. Although milk is clearly a critical part of the diet, it plays little (if any) role in conceptions of Mexican heritage or in contemporary food culture outside the home. For many, milk seems to mean family and nourishment, but in a way that fails to index the broader community or evoke connections to nation. Milk is about taking care of one’s own family; it is neither about patterns of communal rituals of consumption and celebration nor about pride in nation or conceptions of Mexican-ness.

Of course, it is rare that world events unfold in such a way as to create conditions that align perfectly with a social scientist’s object of inquiry—in the years surrounding the tortilla crisis milk prices did not undergo an equivalent spike. However, the price of milk sold through the Leche Liconsa (government-run) stores did rise in the fall of 2006.<sup>26</sup> After maintaining a 3.5 peso/liter price for five years (a price that was, notably, about half that of major commercial brands), Liconsa increased prices to 4.5 pesos—a 28.6 percent increase—on November 17. National newspapers covered the increase, but only briefly, with four articles appearing in *El Universal* during the month of November and coverage dropping off entirely after the director of Liconsa defended the increase and stated that he would not reverse or temper the policy change. The increase received attention on the floor of the legislature,<sup>27</sup> but little, if any, social movement organizing took place.

With the tortilla crisis, however, protesters brought the increase in milk prices to national attention. As shown in the slogan, milk was often tacked onto the end of a declaration or comment about tortillas. The comments of a domestic worker in her twenties in Tlalpan resemble those of other protest participants. When asked why she chose to mobilize against rising tortilla prices but had stayed home when milk prices



rose, she responded: “Of course I was upset with what happened with milk. It became harder to feed my kids overnight. But tortillas felt different. They are part of who we are. I don’t know.”<sup>28</sup> Many interviewees identified a “feeling” around tortillas and invoked the notion of tortillas being a part of a “we” or an “us.”

Deborah Gould’s concept of emotional habitus sheds light on these professed feelings, as well as the ways in which many interviewees ended their remarks with an ambivalent statement like the “I don’t know” quoted here.<sup>29</sup> Drawing on Bourdieu, Gould argues, “Operating beneath conscious awareness, the emotional habitus of a social group provides members with an emotional disposition, with a sense of what and how to feel.”<sup>30</sup> Gould’s concept “locates feelings within social relations and practices,” which helps explain why the socially produced meanings that tortillas take on can evoke such strong emotional reactions.<sup>31</sup> The concept also elucidates the seemingly unconscious, natural qualities to those feelings. Attitudes toward tortillas were so deeply engrained through habitus that it was often difficult for sources to explain where the feelings came from or why they were experienced so powerfully.

It is not surprising that these feelings became attached to or manifested themselves as feelings of national belonging. When pressed further on who was included in the statement “tortillas are part of who we are,” answers differed little. Almost invariably, “we” was meant to refer to “Mexicans.” Tortillas symbolized nation in ways that milk did not—as a result, a threat to them was perceived differently. No one said he or she failed to protest the milk price increase because it was comparably smaller than the increase in tortilla prices.<sup>32</sup>

Resistance to rising corn prices quickly spread; protests in the states of Mexico, Guerrero, and Veracruz were not isolated incidents. Simultaneous mobilizations took place in front of the Ministry of Economy in the Federal District. *El Universal* quoted a Mexico City resident at the January 12 mobilization in Mexico City as saying, “if you don’t eat tortillas, nothing else fills you up.”<sup>33</sup> Tortillas do, indeed, satisfy caloric needs, but they also satisfy appetites for national belonging and domesticity, for family and community. Tortillas nourish conceptions of what it means to be a “good” Mexican mother or provider, reminding consumers of both their heritage and contemporary national practices.

Citywide *cacerolazos* (an oft-used repertoire of contention in Latin America involving the banging of pots and pans on the street) on January 17 offered a glimpse into the ways in which domesticity continued to surface as a tool of political protest across diverse neighborhoods. That afternoon, Mexicans from a variety of occupational and social classes left their homes and workplaces to meet on corners throughout the city. Participants banged pots and pans and carried signs that read, “*Abajo el PAN, viva la tortilla* [Down with the PAN/bread, long live the tortilla],” “*En defensa de la economía popular* [In defense of the popular/family economy],” “*Sin Maíz No Hay País* [Without Corn There Is No Country],” and *Sin Maíz No Somos País* [Without Corn We Aren’t a Country].” Drivers honked their horns in support as they passed, and the protests stopped traffic in the upper-class neighborhood of Coyoacán, its more middle-class neighbor, Tlalpan, and Gustavo A. Madero, one of Mexico City’s northernmost and poorest regions.



In spite of the familiarity of the tactics involved, the *cacerolazos* are illustrative of one of the ways in which the *tortillazo* protests stand apart from “the usual,” where contentious politics are concerned in Mexico. Union, *campesino*, other civil society organizations, and political parties issued the call for the *cacerolazo*. However, many of the participants were unaffiliated with any of Mexico’s highly organized sectors. When I spoke with people unaffiliated with union or *campesino* organizations who protested that day, they invariably told me they came out because they heard about the mobilization from a neighbor, family member, or the radio.<sup>34</sup> Union and *campesino* leaders claimed during interviews that efforts to reach beyond highly organized sectors were intentional and motivated by the sense of possibility created by the issue at stake.<sup>35</sup>

### **Class, Sector, and Nation**

The events surrounding the *tortillazo* brought class to the fore through both the composition of the protests and the language participants and analysts used to describe the crisis. Cross-sectoral, cross-class, cross-urban/rural cooperation dominated the response. The protesters’ language often invoked neither personal nor sectoral interests, but conceptions of national responsibilities and aspirations. The protests became a fight for “the people” and “the poor.” In particular, the crisis suggested an expectation that the poor reaffirm and reproduce their national belonging through tortillas. During the *tortillazo*, a column in the Mexican daily newspaper *Reforma* called a packet of tortillas “one of the most sacred patriotic symbols.”<sup>36</sup> The protests became a fight for Mexico, as if embodied in the “right” to consume tortillas was an effort to preserve a practice that, for many, signified the nation itself.

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

Whereas many stated that they were having trouble making ends meet with tortilla prices so high, a number wanted to speak not for themselves but for Mexico’s poor. The comments of one middle-class participant in the January mobilizations were illustrative of this trend: “Poor people eat more tortillas than the rest of us,” she remarked, “so this

was really affecting them. We have to protect them.”<sup>37</sup> In the calls for the first coordinated protests, union leaders used language that would reappear throughout the rest of the crisis, arguing that they were fighting for Mexico’s poorest: “This hits those who have the least” so government must act, they claimed.<sup>38</sup>

Although middle- and upper-class Mexicans no longer turned to tortillas as a nutritional centerpiece themselves, it seemed critical to some to preserve the tortilla as a staple for the country’s poorest. Mexico’s wealthiest consume less than 15 percent of their daily calories in tortillas, for its poorest the figure is over 70 percent. At the peak of the crisis, spending on tortillas within Mexico’s poorest 10 percent reached more than 17 percent of average monthly income—up from 6.8 percent the previous August. In contrast, Mexico’s wealthiest 10 percent increased their spending on tortillas from 0.3 percent to 0.4 percent of their average monthly income.<sup>39</sup>

Yet even for many for whom the price increase had little impact on monthly spending, the tortilla crisis offended their sensibilities as Mexicans. “It is a shame,” one relatively affluent adult male participating in the protests reflected, “The *tortillazo* undermined the way we are supposed to live as Mexicans. We lose a piece of ourselves when we can’t all eat tortillas.”<sup>40</sup> Other interviews suggested a sentiment of “while we can look elsewhere, or even endure the price increases, it is critical that they maintain the foundation of Mexican culture that is the tortilla.”<sup>41</sup> It was almost as if the idea of the accessibility and affordability of tortillas was more important than the actual prices.

**“A Thing on Which We Could Agree”** The declared universality of the claim to affordable corn and tortillas was apparent from the first protests. Participants were defending what they conceived of as a widely shared right. This was not about transportation workers or coffee farmers, but rather about a threat to “the people.” One participant called the protest a “defense of her rights.”<sup>42</sup> Another added, “we did not come to talk about an individual or party problem: it is a problem for all of the people (*pueblo*).” Individual, personal relationships with the good and a far broader set of responsibilities to “all of the people” are both sacrosanct. The use of *el pueblo* simultaneously evoked a community of all Mexicans, irrespective of class or occupation, and a notion of something understood to be truly Mexican. Even though it is a frame often deployed by the left, the concept of *el pueblo* carries an unimpeachable authenticity—something to be esteemed and protected.<sup>43</sup> In claiming to defend *el pueblo*, protesters situated themselves as defending something quintessentially Mexican.

These conceptions created uncommon alliances. The *tortillazo* protests brought together organized groups—most notably *campesino* and urban worker unions that are often on opposite sides of a given issue. Furthermore, the protests bridged divides within sectors, bringing together *campesino* organizations plagued by personal and political animosities since the end of the *El Campo no Aguanta Más* (ECNAM) movement in 2003.<sup>44</sup> The protests also brought unexpected participants to the streets—urban consumers without formal sectoral affiliations.

*Campesino* organizations were the first to talk about working together to demand government action. The structure of the Mexican corn market meant that the increased

prices benefited farmers only marginally, if at all.<sup>45</sup> However, the price increases did hit farmers as consumers. Although many produce their own tortillas, few do so year round. Seasonal production forces many farmers to consume what they can of their harvest and sell the rest. The remainder of the year, these farmers purchase corn and corn products. The formerly incorporated *Confederación Nacional Campesina* (CNC) joined large independent *campesino* organizations including the *Central Campesina Cardenista* (CCC), the *Confederación Revolucionaria de Obreros y Campesinos* (CROC), and the *Asociación Nacional de Empresas Comercializadoras de Productores del Campo* (ANEC) to rally their membership bases.

Urban union members, beginning with the Metro workers' union and the umbrella transportation union, organized shortly after their *campesino* counterparts. Having only just negotiated a minimum wage agreement for the year, union leaders argued that the increase in tortilla prices made a mockery of their small wage gains and undermined members' ability to meet their families' basic needs.<sup>46</sup> Both the collaboration between unions and *campesino* organizations and the language used to describe that collaboration suggest that tortillas served as a powerful unifier. Francisco Hernández, leader of the *Unión Nacional de Trabajadores* (UNT), recalls thinking, "We had to organize. If we weren't going to fight for tortillas, what were we going to fight for?" Hernández treats mobilization as a political imperative, something around which there was no choice. "We could all work together on this," he went on to say, "It was easy."<sup>47</sup> *Campesino* leader Max Correa used similar language when describing the way in which the movement came together so quickly. "It was pretty clear to us," he argued, "If we weren't going to fight for tortillas, what would we fight for? We had to mobilize [against the tortilla price increases], and working together seemed like the natural thing to do."<sup>48</sup> Unions and *campesino* organizations had thousands of members in the state of Mexico alone, and each organization had well-established and tested mechanisms for mobilization. Once their leadership decided to cooperate, that these groups were able to rally their constituencies is not particularly surprising.

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

The civil society alliance soon joined with political leaders from the *Frente Amplio Progresista* (a leftist political coalition) on January 10 to call for a march "in defense of national *soberanía alimentaria* [food/nutrient sovereignty]" later in the month.<sup>49</sup> The press conference included the electricity, telephone, and social security workers' unions, in addition to six *campesino* organizations. *Partido de la Revolución Democrática* (PRD) leader Porfirio Muñoz Ledo called for a general strike because there was a "coming together of independent unions" that had not been seen for forty years.<sup>50</sup> One *campesino* activist, who appeared to be in his early fifties, recalls, "there was a real sense of a coming together—we were given a moment, a thing on which we could agree."<sup>51</sup>

Many social movement organizers were keenly aware of the ways in which the tortilla crisis cut across issues of class and occupation. Max Correa said, “Listen, we could all agree. We all wanted the same thing. Tortillas are part of what it is to be Mexican. Maybe we were not in agreement about some of the answers, but everyone—rich, poor, worker, *campesino*—we all wanted everyone to be able to buy the tortillas they needed.”<sup>52</sup> Laura Becerra, president of *Equipo Pueblo*, an organization aimed at strengthening civil society, reflected,

There was a *conjunto* [coming together] of the demands with the *tortillazo*. The three sectors [unions, *campesinos*, and popular sectors] were finally really able to come together. It was a real *coyuntura* [coming together in time, critical moment]. Citizens could really identify with the fight, even those that weren’t members of unions or other organizations; we all felt violated so we all participated.<sup>53</sup>

## Corn and Markets

By the end of the first week of January, journalists, activists, government officials, and many other Mexicans had clearly articulated whom they perceived the villains in the *tortillazo* to be. Markets, and free trade in particular, bore the brunt of the critiques. Columnists in national papers, movement organizers, and people on the streets interviewed for television programs revealed that they perceived NAFTA to be responsible for an influx of cheap, American corn and for the elimination of consumer corn subsidies. Markets had rendered access to affordable corn unreliable, infusing the corn market with perceptions of insecurity.

In both interviews after the fact and newspaper coverage during the *tortillazo*, many Mexicans underscored corn and tortillas as goods that should not be subject to the vicissitudes of markets because of their place in Mexican culture. The concern appeared to be about knowing how much tortillas or corn will cost and being able to plan or respond accordingly. Markets are often perceived as working to undermine this predictability, even if these perceptions only manifest themselves in social mobilization when the vulnerability is clear—when prices rise or access is otherwise limited.<sup>54</sup>

The link between free trade and the tortilla crisis is particularly surprising in light of research that suggests that many Mexicans, and Latin Americans more generally, are largely supportive of free-trade policies.<sup>55</sup> Indeed, one might conclude that the PAN’s election in 2006 was an affirmation of broad public support for market-oriented policies more generally. Yet the blame hurled at markets for the crisis and the pervasive argument that unfettered markets were not appropriate where corn and tortillas are concerned suggests that it is not just markets, but rather the item that is getting marketized, that matters.

It is not surprising that the predictably anti-NAFTA crowd quickly placed markets squarely at the center of the crisis. But they were not alone. In particular, officials from every major political party also made the link, suggesting that corn and tortillas are, indeed, understood differently than other commodities included in NAFTA; even the free-market PAN joined the tortillas-should-not-be-subject-to-markets chorus. Héctor

Larios Córdova, the PAN coordinator in the legislative chamber, claimed that the tortilla should be an “exception” to free market principles. He called for permanent subsidies, saying that the small corn discs had special “characteristics” that warranted special protection.<sup>56</sup>

Staunch supporters of free market principles continued to come out in favor of regulation during the tortilla crisis. On January 12, the editorial page of *El Universal*—a paper with editors known for their support of both the PAN and free markets—called on the government to use regulatory mechanisms to “save capitalism from the capitalists.” To keep tortillas off the plates of Mexico’s poorest families “is equivalent to condemning them to hunger, malnutrition, and sickness.”<sup>57</sup> There seems to be a perceived responsibility not only to feed the poor the calories they need, but also to feed them tortillas specifically. Tortillas will both keep Mexicans healthy and help them to be “healthy” Mexicans. The editors asked the government to insert order into the corn/tortilla market through subsidies and interventions; they professed a commitment to capitalism but argued that some things are too important to be left to markets.

Although the abstract concept of “markets” was often singled out for blame, there were disagreements about the specific ways in which markets were failing Mexicans. Newspaper reports and editorials, legislators, and activists repeatedly implicated specific corn flour companies such as Minsa and Gruma, monopolies, and speculators more broadly; free trade in general; and the Calderón administration. The state and so-called middle-men have long been the traditional boogey men of Mexican food politics.<sup>58</sup> With the tortilla crisis, discomfort over the level at which Mexicans were now removed from the production process of critical food staples became strikingly apparent. A columnist in *El Universal* wrote, “If the benefit were for the people that produce, that grow corn, it would be perfect. But that’s not the way it is. It all stays with the hoarders.”<sup>59</sup> A *campesino* leader reflected that “[Maseca, Minsa, and Gruma] have destroyed our countryside. We rely on them now for tortilla. So we are vulnerable. They can do whatever they want.”<sup>60</sup>

The price increase also highlighted a specific set of insecurities as they related to the marketization of corn. A demand that had been present in the ECNAM movement—*soberanía alimentaria* (often translated as “food sovereignty,” the phrase more directly means “nourishment” or “nutriment” sovereignty)—took center stage. With rising reliance on corn imports to meet domestic needs, Mexico had become increasingly vulnerable to international prices. The *tortillazo* suggested that the promise of consumer benefits from free trade through lower prices, at least where corn was concerned, was an unstable reality at best. Furthermore, there were also perceptions that the nation would no longer be able to feed itself. An environmental activist said that “with a product as important as corn, we can’t depend on other nations. We have to be self-sufficient.”<sup>61</sup>

### **The Price Pact and the *Megamarcha***

On January 18, Calderón announced the implementation of the price pact. The dynamics of the movement shifted in its wake. Five million (of the existing 65 million in the

country) *tortillerías* committed to sell tortillas at no higher than 8.5 pesos/kilo through April 30. Supermarkets agreed to sell tortillas at 6 pesos/kilo, and the government distributor, Diconsa (responsible for selling goods largely in rural communities other vendors did not reach), agreed to sell corn at 3.5 pesos/kilo and corn flour at 5 pesos/kilo. The pact fundamentally changed the dynamics of mobilization and participation. It appears to have relieved perceptions of insecurity by demonstrating that the government would not let the crisis pass unaddressed. The state had intervened and generated an expectation of stabilized tortilla prices.<sup>62</sup> Tortillas would not be left to the vicissitudes of markets, and corn would not be subject to monopoly pricing or the evils of speculation.

The price pact mattered for the trajectory of this episode of contention. Mexican authorities created a political spectacle that served to validate protesters' claims, communicate that those claims had been heard, and suggest that the state was on their side. The President declared that he considered the repercussions of the increase in the price of corn "unacceptable" and that he would "firmly" punish anyone who "took advantage of the needs of the people."<sup>63</sup> The pact itself may have been all show—it was, after all, voluntary, and many *tortillerías* did not sign on<sup>64</sup>—but the president's show had a political effect. It suggested that Calderón and his team were listening and sent a message that they would not, in spite of their commitments to open markets, let the price of tortillas be set by the market alone. The pact removed the insecurity-induced anxiety by creating—even if it were only an illusion—the perception that the state was in charge.

Reflecting on the events, Victor Suárez, president of ANEC, recalls that Calderón's price pact served as an "*engaño* [trick]." The pact "tricked the public into thinking the problem was taken care of. We lost the regular, middle-class people we needed with the price pact. They [members of the administration] knew how to co-opt the people."<sup>65</sup> Suárez interprets the pact as a disingenuous signal that worked to produce quiescence. Disingenuous or not, the pact did send the message that the administration was listening and the villain had been neutralized.

The legacies of state intervention—often through clientelistic practices—in the Mexican corn and tortilla market may help to provide some of the answers to the puzzle of rapid demobilization. From the early 1960s, the Mexican government has been heavily involved in regulating and subsidizing producers and consumers at almost every stage in the corn-tortilla chain. Much of that support was phased out prior to NAFTA. When the state systematically pulls away from the predictability that can come with price supports or subsidies, citizens may doubt whether governments are willing to intervene during price crises. Insecurities are heightened when populations are unsure of how a state will respond in the face of rapid price increases of staple goods. The unpredictability of markets works together with vanishing expectations of the state to produce particularly intense experiences of insecurity. While other corn-related concerns (e.g., food sovereignty) might have remained, the price pact addressed the central anxieties around access. The state sent a strong message that tortillas could remain a staple of the Mexican diet. It seemed to matter less whether or not they came from Walmart than that they were on the table at all.

**January 31, 2007** Yet even as the movement appeared to sputter, inter-sectoral cooperation continued to dominate. The march to the *Zócalo* on January 31 was a moment of exemplary coordination and unity among and within groups from a variety of backgrounds with a variety of agendas. With the price pact in place, tortilla prices were no longer the central rallying cry. Instead, movement organizers emphasized *soberanía alimentaria*, a frame that continued to highlight connections between tortillas and nation.

As planning for the march progressed, leaders from the various organizations may have had their own interests or goals in mind. A number of Mexican officials called the protests “opportunistic,” claiming that the organizations driving the movement cared little about corn prices and were merely taking advantage of an issue they knew would galvanize a broad participation.<sup>66</sup> Indeed, some leaders claimed unabashedly to have taken advantage of the crisis to push a prior anti-neoliberal or anti-PAN agenda. In the *tortillazo*, they saw an opportunity to mobilize Mexicans to join long-standing fights against free trade and the PAN or in favor of subsidies.<sup>67</sup> Prominent public intellectual Sergio Sarmiento explicitly called the march a purely political move staged by Calderón’s opponents in the PRD and PRI.<sup>68</sup>

Not surprisingly, the PRD did seek to formally participate in the rally on January 31, an issue that became the subject of significant internal disagreement. Union, civil society, and *campesino* leaders fought vigorously to keep former PRD presidential candidate (who narrowly lost to the PAN candidate amid widespread accusations of fraud the previous summer) Andrés Manuel López Obrador from speaking at the march. They wanted to send a clear message that their movement was distinct from López Obrador’s; organizers did not want to undermine their potentially cross-party appeal with partisan controversy.<sup>69</sup>

Perhaps counterintuitively, Sarmiento’s cry of opportunism and PRD’s insistence on participating offer further support for the argument made here. The tortilla crisis offered an extraordinary political opportunity: the crisis gave the opposition an issue around which it could come together. However, that the opportunity was possible at all is a product of the meanings with which corn was imbued.<sup>70</sup> Regardless of activists’ own perceptions of the role of corn in constructing communities, they capitalized on the broad-based appeal of the issue. The political opportunity existed only because of the ways in which tortillas symbolize community in Mexico.

On January 31, 2007, Mexican activists began the *mega-marcha* from different spots throughout the city, aiming to converge on the central plaza. The *Frente Sindical Mexicano* (FSM), led by the *Sindicato Mexicano de Electricistas* (SME), started at the Monument to the Revolution. The UNT, including social security, telephone, pilot, and transportation workers, started at the *Zócalo* itself. *Campesino* organizations began at the Angel of Independence; the Citizens’ Alliance for Democracy and other citizens’ groups began at the monument to Columbus.<sup>71</sup> The leaders of the protest called it a “march for food independence and in defense of salaries and employment.” The movement had, for a time, not only created a cross sector alliance but also mobilized Mexicans who ordinarily stayed home when sectoral organizations sought to mobilize the masses.



## Conclusion

Jeffrey Pilcher argues that “Despite centuries of efforts to change them, Mexicans remain a people of corn.”<sup>72</sup> Corn cultivation and consumption are both part of an “ancient tradition” that must be protected in order to ensure that being Mexican still means something and because they are simply a description of what “we do” as Mexicans. Corn and community are intimately intertwined in the Mexican context. Analysis of the tortilla crisis shows how a social movement can emerge when markets threaten to weaken or reconfigure these ties. The *tortillazo* reminded Mexicans of corn’s place in their lives and livelihoods, created a perception of corn’s potential vulnerability, tapped into deeply rooted connections to family, evoked perceptions of class, and heightened feelings of national belonging. As a result, politicians crossed party lines to voice common goals, sectoral organizations with histories plagued by disagreement mounted a joint campaign, and “ordinary” citizens banged pots and pans in the streets in protest.

Frames were key in this process, but how and why they worked the way they did requires attention to the signifying work that corn does in the Mexican context. Frames related to family, security, sovereignty, and nation can be potent mobilization tools, but to be effective, they must resonate. The meanings with which corn was already imbued could not have been the product of clever framing by social movement activists already opposed to NAFTA, fighting on behalf of *soberanía alimentaria*, or working to secure better union wages. Although a number of organizations were ready to be mobilized in protest, the frames were powerful political tools only because they tapped into what corn and tortillas already meant to many Mexicans. The anti-NAFTA, anti-globalization, pro-countryside, and pro-union activists took advantage of a political opportunity created by the intersection of the price spike and the ways in which the spike was meaningful in a variety of contexts. That tortillas can be framed as goods that are synecdochic for or emblematic of the Mexican *pueblo* in ways that resonate powerfully throughout the country is the critical point. Tortillas and corn were already understood by many Mexicans to symbolize the Mexican nation and to wed nationalism to domesticity. Absent those meanings, claims of, for example, “without corn there is no country” could not have galvanized a popular mobilization.

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

These findings have important implications for future research on resistance to market reforms and responses to food crises. The events of the *tortillazo* suggest that we should pay careful attention not only to the material impact of markets or prices

but also to the ways in which the goods at stake might symbolize imagined or quotidian communities or heighten feelings of insecurity or vulnerability.<sup>73</sup> These dynamics might shed light on the kinds of coalitions that form and why they do so. Goods that take on meanings that cut across traditional cleavages may have the power to mobilize across those cleavages as well. The analysis also suggests that paying attention to the symbolic dimension of anti-market mobilizations could help us better understand other aspects of mobilization processes. For example, the mention of dramatic food price increases often precedes images of riots. Yet the mobilizations in response to rising tortilla prices in Mexico were planned, coordinated, and consistently peaceful. Perhaps attention to the ways in which some foodstuffs symbolize family and nation, while others do not, would shed light on why some episodes of contention are seemingly sudden and violent, while others are planned and peaceful. The *tortillazo* protests show that there is more going on in anti-market mobilizations than political openings or perceptions of material hardship.

## NOTES

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1. Karl Polanyi, *The Great Transformation: The Political and Economic Origins of Our Time* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2001). See also Eduardo Silva, *Challenging Neoliberalism in Latin America* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

2. E.g., Felipe Agüero and Jeffrey Stark, *Fault Lines of Democracy in Post-Transition Latin America* (Boulder: North-South Center Press, 1998); Marcus Kurtz, "The Dilemmas of Democracy In the Open Economy: Lessons From Latin America," *World Politics*, 54 (January 2004), 262–302; Philip Oxhorn and Graciela Ducatenzeiler, *What Kind of Democracy? What Kind of Market? Latin America in the Age of Neoliberalism* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1998).

3. See Erica Simmons, "Market Reforms and Water Wars," *World Politics*, 61 (January 2016), 37–73 for an exploration of similar dynamics in response to water privatization in Cochabamba, Bolivia.

4. Cooperation between unions and farmers' organizations evidenced in January 2007 is not routine. Furthermore, splits within the *campesino* movement, particularly in the aftermath of *El Campo No Aguanta Más* (ECNAM)—a national movement to secure agrarian reforms—had hindered cooperation.

5. E.g., Kurtz; Philip and Ducatenzeiler; Silva; Walton, John, and David Seddon, *Free Markets and Food Riots* (Cambridge: Blackwell, 1994); Deborah J. Yashar, *Contesting Citizenship in Latin America: The Rise of Indigenous Movements and the Postliberal Challenge* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

6. Andy Baker, "Why Is Trade Reform so Popular in Latin America? A Consumption-Based Theory of Trade Policy Preferences," *World Politics*, 55 (April 2003), 423–55; Andy Baker, *The Market and the Masses in Latin America: Policy Reform and Consumption in Liberalizing Economies* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

7. E.g., Cullen Hendrix and Stephan Haggard, "Where and Why Food Prices Lead to Social Upheaval," *Monkey Cage: Washington Post*, 2015; Cullen Hendrix, Stephan Haggard, and Beatriz Magaloni, "Grievance and Opportunity: Food Prices, Political Regime, and Protest," Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the International Studies Association, New York, February, 2009.

8. Simmons, 2016.

9. On imagined communities see Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (New York: Verso, 1991). On quotidian communities, see Erica Simmons,

"Grievances Do Matter in Mobilization," *Theory and Society* 43 (September 2014), 513–36; and Erica Simmons, *Meaningful Resistance: Market Reforms and the Roots of Social Protest in Latin America* (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2016).

10. On heightening feelings of "groupness" see Rogers Brubaker, *Ethnicity Without Groups* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004).

11. Author interview, June 2009, Mexico City. Some of the interviews were conducted in confidentiality and the names of the interviewees are withheld by mutual agreement.

12. On social movement theory see Doug McAdam, John D. McCarthy, and Mayer N. Zald, *Comparative Perspectives on Social Movements: Political Opportunities, Mobilizing Structures, and Cultural Framings* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996); Doug McAdam, Sidney G. Tarrow, and Charles Tilly, *Dynamics of Contention* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001). For critiques, see Jeff Goodwin and James Jasper, *Rethinking Social Movements: Structure, Meaning, and Emotion* (Lanham: Rowman Littlefield Publishers, 2004).

13. The 2007 tortilla protests drew on connections developed during the 1994 Zapatista movement and the 2003 *El Campo No Aguanta Más* (The Countryside Can Bear No More—ECNAM) movement.

14. Alfred Stepan, *The State and Society: Peru in Comparative Perspective* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978).

15. Alan Knight, "The Rise and Fall of Cardenismo," in Leslie Bethell, ed., *Mexico since Independence* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 241–320.

16. Ilán Bizberg, "El sindicalismo en fin de regimen," *Foro Internacional*, 43 (2003), 215–48.

17. Robert Benford and David Snow, "Framing Processes and Social Movements: An Overview and Assessment," *Annual Review of Sociology*, 26 (2000), 611–39; David Snow and Robert Benford, "Master Frames and Cycles of Protest," in Aldon Morris and Carol Mueller, eds., *Frontiers in Social Movement Theory* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), 133–55.

18. Dennis Tedlock, *Popol vuh: The Mayan Book of the Dawn of Life* (New York: Simon Schuster, 1996).

19. Simmons, 2016; Wedeen, 2002.

20. I relied on *El Sol de México*, *Milenio*, *El Universal*, *La Jornada*, and *Reforma* for newspaper coverage of corn and tortillas July 2006–February 2007. I conducted a more targeted search prior to those dates, looking for coverage of NAFTA specifically, and marketization more generally.

21. See Jeffrey M Pilcher, *Que vivan los tamales!: Food and the Making of Mexican Identity* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1998).

22. Ernesto Núñez and Margarita Vêga, "Reclaman a FCH aumento a tortilla," *Reforma*, Jan. 12, 2007.

23. Arjun Appadurai, "How to Make a National Cuisine: Cookbooks in Contemporary India," *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 30 (1988), 3–24.

24. Author interview, May 2009, Mexico City.

25. *Encuesta Nacional de Ingresos y Gastos de los Hogares*, 2005.

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

27. Ricardo Gómez, "Diputados 'toman' la tribuna por alza a leche," *El Universal*, Nov. 17, 2006.

28. Author interview, *tortillazo* protester, March 2009, Mexico City.

29. Deborah Gould, *Moving Politics: Emotion and Act Up's Fight against AIDS* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009).

30. *Ibid.*, 34.

31. *Ibid.*, 35.

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

33. Angélica Simón, "GDF: este lunes, plan contra alza a tortillas," *El Universal*, Jan. 13, 2007.

34. Author interviews with *tortillazo* protesters, January–July 2009, Mexico City. This citation is meant to indicate that the evidence for the preceding claim came from multiple interviewees during the course of research. Variations on this citation appear throughout the text. I try to be as specific as possible in each of the citations.

35. Author interviews with union and *campesino* leaders, January–July 2009, Mexico City.

36. Germán Dehesa, "Cosas II," *Reforma*, Jan. 26, 2007.

37. Author interview, *tortillazo* protester, June 25, 2009, Mexico City.

38. Daniel Pensamiento, "Rechazan alza a tortilla," *Reforma*, Jan. 9, 2007. This discussion suggests that perhaps many Mexicans simply seemed to care about the welfare of the poor regardless of the type of threat. This is unlikely for two reasons. First, if claims were based purely on material welfare, there would

be little reason to protest, as wheat remained a potentially cheaper substitute. Second, there is little historical precedent to suggest that large numbers of Mexicans mobilize when they perceive that the material well-being of the poor is at risk.

39. Reyes Tépach M., “El impacto en los hogares del país del incremento en el precio de la TORTILLA” (Mexico City: Centro de Documentación, Información y Análisis, 2007), 5.

40. Author interview, *tortillazo* protester, April 2009, Mexico City.

41. Author interviews, *tortillazo* protesters, April–July 2009, Mexico City.

42. Mariana Ledezma, “Protestan por aumentos a básicos,” *El Universal*, Jan. 13, 2007.

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

44. For more on the ECNAM movement see Sánchez Albarrán.

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

46. Author interviews, January–July 2009, Mexico City. See also coverage in *La Jornada* and *Reforma*.

47. Author interview, July 15, 2009, Mexico City.

48. Author interview, May 28, 2009, Mexico City.

49. Juan Balboa, “Llama el FAP a defender la soberanía alimentaria,” *La Jornada*, Jan. 12, 2007.

50. Alberto Aguirre and Emmanuel Salazar, “Anuncia el FAP movilizaciones,” *Reforma*, Jan. 12, 2007.

51. Author interview, February 20, 2009, Mexico City. The analysis here focuses on collaboration among social movement activists within the state of Mexico. However, protests were not limited to the capital state or city. At the national level, a number of civil society organizations came together to call themselves the *Cruzada Nacional en Defensa de la Tortilla*. The coalition included, but was not limited to, groups in Monterrey, Puebla, Morelos, Michoacán, and Jalisco.

52. Author interview, May 2009, Mexico City.

53. Author interview, June 2009, Mexico City.

54. This is not to suggest that mobilization won't occur if a threat to corn comes from, for example, a natural disaster. But the theoretical mechanisms at work may very well look different.

55. Baker, 2003, 2009.

56. Héctor Larios, “El mercado: cuándo intervenir,” *El Universal*, Jan. 25, 2007.

57. “Las tortillas y el capitalismo salvaje,” *El Universal*, Jan. 12, 2007.

58. See Enrique Ochoa, *Feeding Mexico: The Political Uses of Food since 1910* (Wilmington: Scholarly Resources, 2000).

59. “Las tortillas y el capitalismo salvaje,” *El Universal*, Jan. 12, 2007.

60. Author interview, May 2009, Mexico City.

61. Author interview, Greenpeace Mexico employee, March 2009, Mexico City. The Calderón administration's decision to react first by increasing corn imports elicited a strong negative reaction from social movement and political leaders. The argument was that increased imports would only encourage speculation and that purchasing this fundamental element of the Mexican diet abroad was a grave error.

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

63. “Firmado el acuerdo que permitirá estabilizar el precio del maíz,” *Cinco Días*, Jan. 18, 2007.

64. By January 20, representatives of millers' associations were already saying that it would be impossible to reduce the price of tortillas to 8.5 pesos/kilo. Noel Gómez, “Anuncian marcha por el incremento a las tortillas,” *Sipse*, Jan. 20, 2007.

65. Author interview, February 2009, Mexico City.

66. Author interviews, Mexican government officials, May–July 2009, Mexico City.

67. Author interviews, *tortillazo* movement leaders, January–July 2009.

68. Sergio Sarmiento, “Jaque Mate / Contradicciones,” *Reforma*, Feb. 1, 2007.

69. Author interviews, January–July 2009, Mexico City. Ultimately, López Obrador led his own rally at 7:00 pm, after the cross-sectoral alliance had completed its event.

70. See Simmons, 2014 for a discussion of meaning making and grievances.

71. Patricia Muñoz, Matilde Pérez, and Fabiola Martínez, “‘Nuevo pacto social’, piden miles en el Zócalo,” *La Jornada*, Feb. 1, 2007.

72. Pilcher, 6.

73. See Simmons, 2014 and Simmons, 2016 for further exploration of these questions.