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The Debate Over Food Sovereignty in Mexico

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Abstract

In 2007 a popular movement called *Sin maíz no hay país y sin frijol tampoco* emerged in Mexico, in response to the domestic food crisis. This was conceived as the leading edge of the 2007 and 2008 global food crises. The movement advocated for the protection of domestic staple agriculture and food sovereignty. It sought to create fair competition between US and Mexican farmers by encouraging the re-negotiation of the ***Agricultural Chapter*** of NAFTA; and to defend native varieties of corn against their replacement with GM. This presentation examines responses by both Mexican society and state to this food crisis. It focuses on meanings, ideas, actions, relationships, and processes that dominant and popular groups set in motion. It identifies the ways in which the Mexican neoliberal state has manipulated the market according to the principles of “competitive and comparative advantages,” to redistribute public resources unequally among producers and to open Mexican food market to imports. It argues that the Mexican state’s food market interventions are contradictory since (1) it legitimizes neoliberalism by claiming that the market should be the only force shaping internal production; and (2) Mexican agriculture is more exposed than ever to the negative impacts of global trade. Accordingly, *Sin maíz no hay país* is an illustration of less-privileged farmers and urban groups’ struggle against Mexico’s neoliberal food and agriculture policies and global food market instability, while promoting small-scale staple farming.

“What was the impact of thousands of people chanting at once, ‘Sin maíz no hay país, sin frijol tampoco,’ while seizing Mexico City’s streets on January 2007, and two million of them doing the same at the beginning of 2008?” an activist in this movement asked himself.

Then there was a moment of silence. A bit later, he answered his own question: “There has been no impact. Nothing has changed at all [as a result of our collective actions]...”

- Pablo, a university professor²

This paper addresses the emergence in Mexico of a national popular movement, ***Sin maíz no hay país y sin frijol tampoco*** (There is no country without our domestically-produced corn and beans), in response to the 2007 Mexican food crisis, popularly called the *crisis de la tortilla* (The

² Pablo teaches in a private university while promoting regional, small, organic producers as well as traditional family farming. He also has participated in several demonstrations carried out by the popular movement *Sin maíz no hay país*. This movement, as we shall see, first emerged as a popular *campaña* (movement) for Mexican food sovereignty in 2007.

Tortilla Crisis). This crisis was seen in Mexico as the leading edge of the 2007 and 2008 worldwide food crises. The movement advocated for protections for domestic staple agriculture, especially maize, and broader food sovereignty for the nation. More specifically, the movement has sought (1) to create fair conditions of competition between US and Mexican farmers; (2) to negotiate public policy-making with Mexico's state agents, in order to (2.1) encourage domestic production of corn and beans to satisfy internal food demand, (2.2) avoid dependency on staple foodstuffs from foreign markets, (2.3) and encourage re-negotiation of the ***Agricultural Chapter*** of the North American Free Trade Agreement, (NAFTA), in order to support domestic corn and bean production; and (3) to defend both native and historical varieties of corn, as well as locally diverse ones (i.e., *criollas*), against the appropriation of genetic information and/or their replacement with genetically modified seeds made by transnational agro-industries (i.e., Monsanto, Cargill, Dupont).

This paper examines responses by both the Mexican public and the Mexican state to the *crisis de la tortilla*. It focuses, first, on meanings, ideas, symbols, actions, relationships, and processes that distinctive actors, in both dominant and popular groups, set in motion during the crisis.³ The *Sin maíz* movement must be examined in order to comprehend the polyphony of urban and rural voices and the interplay between dominant and the popular groups that rose against (i) the increase of cheap, highly-subsidized North American staple foods imported by Mexico; and (ii) the degradation of Mexican identity as it relates to the disappearance of key Mexican food icons. *Sin maíz* is an urban and rural movement that sees itself as part of an ongoing struggle for ***Mexican food sovereignty***. I argue that these diverse popular challenges to the growing importance of US food commodities in the Mexican diet embody a rejection of neoliberal policies that have brought about the significant expansion of food imports since NAFTA. They also express popular resistance to the abandonment of domestic agriculture geared to Mexican demand and TO policies promoting the growth of the internal market. Thus, the Tortilla Crisis actually opened a space for farmers to explore new avenues for keeping corn production as their main economic activity, and a new arena in which to openly contest Mexico's neoliberal ideas and practices regarding agriculture and food.

Secondly, this paper analyzes the programs that the Mexican state launched to cope with both 2007 and 2008 tortillas crises due to the vulnerability to international market fluctuations as well as the impact of the accompanying international food crisis, on the one hand, and, on the other, the full opening of the Mexican market to US and Canadian staple foods in January, 2008, through NAFTA. This paper identifies the various ways in which the Mexican neoliberal state manipulates the market according to the principles of "competitive and comparative advantages," attempting to redistribute public resources unequally among agricultural

³ For a deeper theoretical discussion see Rodríguez-Gómez 1998, 2004.

producers. I argue that the Mexican state's food market interventions are ironic, since the official discourse has legitimized our country's embrace of neoliberalism and radical changes in the relationships between the state and the producers, while the state's claim from the 1980s onward that the market is and should be the only force shaping internal production. Nowadays, due to these ideas and practices of both state machinery and other groups in power, Mexican agriculture is more exposed than ever to the fluidity and contradictions of global trade (OCDE 2011:4). In this vein, the movement *Sin maíz no hay país y sin frijol tampoco* is an illustration of less-privileged farmers and urban groups struggle against both Mexico's neoliberal food and agriculture policies, the negative effects of international food market instability on their daily lives, and the promotion of domestic agriculture –particularly: small-scale staple farming.

The problem

In the mid-1970s, Mexico was producing most of its own staple foodstuffs, such as corn, dry edible beans, and sugar.⁴ Indeed, in 1975 corn surpluses were valued at 283 million pesos and those of wheat at 680 million pesos (Hewitt 1974). However, since NAFTA that has no longer been the case. To the contrary “rising agricultural prices [in the global market], combined with growing import dependence, have driven Mexico's food import bill over \$20 billion USD per year and increased its agricultural deficit... [In terms of maize] Mexico runs an annual production deficit of roughly 10 million tons and an import bill for maize of more than \$2.5 billion USD/year” (Turrent et al. 2012:2).

As a result of the neoliberal policies of the early 1980s mentioned above, policies embraced in an effort to reduce barriers to food imports and to improve Mexican agriculture competitiveness through NAFTA,⁵ US commodities have been imported in ever greater

⁴In the 1980s Mexico, like other countries at this point, was part of the Second Food regime, a stage characterized by the global spread of industrial agriculture through the “Green Revolution” (McMichael in Holt Giménez and Shattuck 2011:110). This revolution “injected high-yielding varieties of a few cereals (wheat, maize, rice) coupled with the heavy use of subsidized fertilizers, pesticides, irrigation and machinery” (Ibid.). This Green Revolution took place from the 1960s to early 1980s in Mexico. It was concentrated in the two main cereals consumed domestically: wheat and corn (Hewitt 1978:35); these occupied 72% of agricultural land (Ibid.). The Revolution was primarily carried out by large-scale, wealthy producers (Hewitt 1974). It should be noted that these actors had “obtained higher yields and profits than other farm sectors because they ... controlled incalculably greater and better resources [like irrigated land], not because they have been more efficient” (Ibid.) Paradoxically, these farmers only produced 32% of agricultural internal demand. In contrast, “the contribution of smaller farmers ... exceeds their relative control of resources” (Ibid.). In summary, the Mexican Green Revolution was a highly exclusionary socioeconomic and political process, which in turn exaggerated the already long-standing inequality amongst different farmers. By the mid-1980s, the Green Revolution overlapped with neoliberalism in Mexico, at which point, as in many countries, it drew to a close.

⁵ Neoliberalism was formalized when Mexico signed the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT), 1986. This political economic trend was accentuated at the signing of the North American Free Trade Agreement, NAFTA,

quantities to satisfy Mexican demand – most significantly, internal demand for the country’s primary staple foods (Zahniser 2007).⁶ Indeed, since NAFTA, 59% of US agricultural and food exports have gone to Mexico and Canada. By the same token, agricultural trade between Mexico and the US has tripled, with the US showing a positive trade balance and Mexico a negative one (Zahniser 2007 in Burstein 2007:5-6). Indeed, from 1993 to 2011 Mexican agricultural and food exports grew five times to a value of \$22,000 million USD, while our imports’ value was \$27,067 million USD (Grupo de Trabajo de Estadísticas de Comercio Exterior 2012 in FAO-SAGARPA-SEDESOL 2013:xxxiii).

Government officials, large-scale domestic farmers, and the most powerful national and multinational agrifood corporations claim that Mexican production of staple foods has decreased mainly because of most farmers’ inefficiency and lack of interest in transitioning to commercial entrepreneurial farming. By arguing this, the members of these power groups legitimize the sharp increase of food commodities imports, particularly imports of staple foods from the US due to NAFTA. According to several scholars specializing in rural Mexico and according to many members of popular groups, these powerful actors’ arguments appear to ignore the growing dependency for basic foods that Mexico has on both the global market and, more specifically, the North American one. Víctor Suárez, a former leader of *Sin maíz no hay país y sin frijol tampoco*, argued that Mexico has gone from relative food sovereignty in the early 1990s to 42% food dependency on the foreign market in 2008 (Suárez 2008). In this vein, in 2012, 68% of the agricultural products imported to Mexico were staple grains (43%) and oil crop products (25%), and 46% of imported agro-industrial goods were different types of meat, dairy products, and oils (SAGARPA 2013:46). In 2012, Suárez argued that we could “cut the country’s maize import dependence in half by 2018 through 4% annual growth in food and agricultural production while banning transgenic maize (Suárez in Turrent et al. 2012:7).

From the perspective of these critics of Mexican policy, the country has put itself at risk of food insecurity as a result of the complex intertwining of these historically-specific neoliberal policies and the trajectory of capitalism in our country (Suárez 2008; CONEVAL 2013a). They are correct in that the main problems of the rural sector in Mexico today are: poor agricultural productivity and a significant increase in rural poverty (RIMISP 2013:12; see also FAO-SAGARPA 2012). These in turn are the product of two simultaneous processes. One is what has been called “selective modernization,” a process by which only some producers, regions, and states have been

1994-2008 (for an in-depth historical discussion of the embodiment of neoliberalism by the Mexican state and capitalism in Mexico see Rodríguez-Gómez 1997:245-253, and Rodríguez-Gómez and Torres 1996).

⁶ The opening of the Mexican market to the NAFTA region (particularly to the US) resulted in an increase of food and agricultural imports equivalent to as much as 50% of Mexico’s agricultural gross domestic product (GDP) (Puyana 2008:119). By the same token, the amount of agricultural goods exported to the neighboring market grew by less than 20% of Mexico’s GDP.

targeted to get the most state support, based on simplistic economic criteria that categorize them as either “viable” or “nonviable” (Rodríguez-Gómez 1998; RIMISP 2013). This same selective modernization pushed many producers out of agriculture, based on the criteria of “efficiency, competitiveness, and quality production according global criteria” (Rodríguez-Gómez 1998). The second process at work is the historical trend in Mexico’s agricultural policy of concentrating support on medium- and large-scale farmers, arguing that these are more highly productive and efficient than small-scale farmers (Echánove 2013:22).

In regard to increasing hunger, we must recall that leaders seeking food sovereignty claimed that there were 50 million Mexicans living in poverty in 2008. From 2008 to 2012, Mexico’s poverty index went from 49.5% to 53.3% (CONEVAL 2013:106). In 2012, this meant that 45.5% of Mexicans were poor (Ibid. 20). In rural areas, 61.6% Mexicans lived in poverty – 21.5% at the level of extreme poverty and 40.1% at a moderate level of poverty (Ibid. 22). These percentages support the contentions of popular resistance leaders that most Mexicans have faced increasing difficulty consuming (or even for having access to) their main staple foods, such as corn (i.e., *tortillas*, a corn-based staple) and beans.⁷ In 2008 they pointed out that the basic Mexican diet had increased in price by 40.6% over the previous two years (Suárez 2008). 2010 provides a similar illustration of the situation, since in that year the *canasta básica* (basic food diet) cost \$684 *per person* monthly. At that time, people at the extreme level of poverty living in rural areas received an average income of \$23 per day, an amount obviously inadequate to cover such high food prices (García-Manzano 2013:1).

In contrast, members of the dominant groups cited above seek to justify the progression towards food insecurity by claiming that the Mexican state had sufficient financial resources to secure enough cheap imported food to satisfy Mexican societal demand. They did so guided by the neoliberal logic of producing according to “competitive and comparative advantages.” This principle has been used since the early 1980s to legitimize several trends. One is a significant shift away from internal production of enough food to satisfy the Mexican market and towards a “model” based upon particular support for agricultural production of food for export – that is, a growing tendency to increase staple-grain imports. Another is a further reduction to what were already limited programs to support the growth of small-scale staple farmers (RIMISP 2013; Robles 2013). A third is incentivizing farmers to switch from production of staple foods to production of food and agricultural products with a higher value in the global market. Two paradigmatic cases of the latter tendency are: Zacatecan small-scale farmers switching from bean production to production of barley for the regional beer industry and fruits and

⁷ This has been the traditional Mexican diet, across class, ethnic, and urban/rural distinctions, almost since the arrival of Spaniards in the New World.

vegetables for export;⁸ and Chiapan staple producers changing to forestry or to African palm production (Fletes et al. 2013; Gonzalez 2013).

State officials also claim that *food sovereignty is an old-fashioned concept, saying that sovereignty simply means “self-sufficiency.”* Thus, they argue, **Mexico is no longer willing to embrace a closed economic system that has no links to the global market, as it did before neoliberalism.** In this line, they argue that having enough public resources to buy food from the global market rather than “investing in inefficient internal farmers” is the “road to Mexican agricultural modernization”.

These points show how these members of groups in power attempt to gloss over the negative impact of neoliberal policies (impacts such as a decrease in credit, the absence of programs to encourage production for Mexican domestic market rather than export agriculture, and the lack of policies and actions oriented to promote productivity among small-scale producers) on the small- and medium-scale farmers that constitute 80-90% of current Mexican producers (CIESAS-CONEVAL 2013; see also FAO-SAGARPA 2012). As a result of these changes, thousands of these producers across the country are losing their material capacity to keep farming. Consequently, many of them have been forced to abandon agriculture as their primary economic activity and/or to migrate. Those who migrate work as seasonal laborers for export-oriented agricultural projects all over Mexico, as part of an informal labor force in rapidly urbanized medium- and large-scale cities, or as illegal workers in the US. Dominant actors also ignore the socioeconomic inequality brought about as part of neoliberal processes, since these policies have accentuated long-standing social and economic polarization among producers and regions (Hewitt 1978; Hewitt 1974; Fox and Haight 2010; Robles 2013; Rodríguez-Gómez 2013; Echánove 2013). As an illustration, 40% of the Ministry of Agriculture budget from 2007 to 2010 was directed to five states (Sinaloa, Tamaulipas, Sonora, Jalisco and Chihuahua) out of the 32 states which constitute Mexico (Robles 2013a). In 2008, only five states consumed most of the resources of the Program to Support Non-intensive Cattle Production (PROGAN): Chiapas (\$298,667,797 pesos), Chihuahua (\$207,356,720), Tabasco (\$191,761,935), Tamaulipas (\$170,654,412), and Oaxaca (\$168,314,837) (Rodríguez-Gómez 2013). Indeed, these five as a group received double the amount gotten by the rest of the states (Ibid.). Finally, in 2010, another group of five states had access to 73% of the program *Cobertura de Precios* (Staple

⁸ Zacatecas was the second-highest state in bean production at the national level. From 2004 to 2010, the government of this state, supported by the United States Department of Agriculture, (USDA), began “helping” farmers to switch from bean production to barley in order to link their grain production to local production of beer (personal information from former governor of Zacatecas, Amalia García, April 2008). Looking at statistics, this change has resulted in a significant decrease in Mexican production of black beans –in Zacatecas, and, simultaneously, an increase of imported black beans from the US and Canada.

Food Price Protection) -- Sinaloa, Tamaulipas, Sonora, Chihuahua and Baja California (Echánove 2013).

Finally, these changes in socioeconomic, cultural, and political dimensions have had an impact on both urban and rural diets and health, since the building blocks of the traditional Mexican diet are now far less readily available and far more expensive. Members of the dominant groups neglect the fact that US agricultural producers are highly subsidized by their own government, and they thus have an unfair advantage in bi-national trade, due mostly to lower costs of production and subsidies for exporting their agricultural commodities. By the same token, there has been a growing power of private sector oligopolies over the purchase and industrialization of grain production – i.e., corn to produce *tortillas* (Suárez 2008; Appendini 2009, 2012).⁹ In this vein, it is important to remember that in 2012 two national corporations, Maseca and Minsa, as well as two multinational agribusinesses, Cargill and Archer Daniels Midland, controlled 66% of Mexico's maize production (Rubio 2013:58). Multinational corporations also exercise increasing control over seed supplies, mainly in the form of genetically engineered seed stocks like those of Monsanto.

Sin maíz no hay país y sin frijol tampoco as a resistance movement that seeks to preserve Mexican maize and keep it safe from “pollution,” since it is a grain whose origins go back centuries in Mexico. Members of the movement cite *maíz* (maize/corn) and *tortillas* as icons of a *Mexicanidad* (Mexican-ness) that cross class lines in the lives both of Mexicans living inside the country and Mexican expatriates and migrants (Comité de Sin maíz no hay país 2003). The movement invites the public to remember that corn has been the main crop cultivated in their country since pre-colonial times. Indeed, they ask Mexicans and the world to keep in mind that Mexico is the place of origin of maize's domestication. Consequently, this movement advocates for both Mexican domestic cultivation of corn and beans as well as the consumption of these grains internally as (1) a strategy for staple-food sovereignty and food security, while (2) re-constructing Mexican nationhood in a highly competitive neoliberal and globalized context based upon the consumption of corn and beans as the keystones of the Mexican diet, and (3) re-emphasizing the significance for the Mexican food market of small and medium-scale staple agriculture, particularly family farms specializing in corn and beans (LM interview, LM is an active member of Sin maíz).

I base this analysis (i) on the examination of publications that address the *Sin maíz* movement – some of these studies have been written by leaders (mainly scholars) who belong to this group;

⁹ There are 20 national and transnational agrifood corporations that exercise great control over both Mexican agriculture and its food market, including Maseca, Bimbo, Cargill, Bachoco, Pilgrims Pride, Tysson, Nestlé, and Lala, among others (Rubio 2013:58).

(ii) on systematic review of the media coverage (regional, national, and international newspapers as well as state programs and publications); and (iii) on systematic study and formal evaluations of Ministry of Agriculture policies and programs of the last decade. *I enrich this examination with participant observation conducted from 2007 to the present day as a member of an informal group of actors who have been attempting to have an impact on the making of public policy on family agriculture and food security in Mexico.* As part of this non-formalized network, *I have been working with members of Sin maíz no hay país y sin frijol tampoco (1) in academic arenas* (i.e., national and regional seminars) in which we present either papers based upon our research work or direct personal/collective accounts of Mexican staple food production; and (2) elaborating papers for federal and state deputies, national senators as well as for the UN representative of The right for food for getting their support to our struggle for Mexican Constitutional Amendment in order to incorporate the right to quality food for all in Mexico that. ***Our hope is that these conversations and actions in diverse arenas will help to re-situate Mexican agriculture socially and culturally in Mexico's government agenda as well as in the consciousness of our society at large.*** The group with which I participate is constituted by different members of Sin maíz no hay país, as cited above, as well as of farmers, leaders of formal groups of staple food producers, agricultural entrepreneurs, and state agents (federal deputies and senators as well as officers of the National Agriculture Department), all using scientific and popular knowledge as a bridge between different and unequal actors to construct a “shared” understanding and agenda.

I argue that these forms of collective action against the rise of Mexico's staple food imports – particularly US food commodities – and the goal of reconstructing Mexican food sovereignty have become a new arena for knowledge and power struggles. The complex interplay between, on the one hand, public policies privileging inflow of US staple foods and agricultural outputs from the US while discouraging domestic production of them and, on the other, the wide variety of overt forms of resistance from diverse critical groups, epitomizes the current contradictory struggle between dominant and popular cultures in Mexico. It embodies a battle over the meanings and practices of production, commercialization, and consumption of corn and beans; staple food cultivation; and Mexico's food security and sovereignty. This battle has, in turn, re-emphasized symbols and practices of “modern *Mexicanidad*.” This is a struggle to identify, appropriate, and construct ways to reconfigure Mexico as a nation in a highly dynamic globalized context.

The point of departure: La crisis de la tortilla

La crisis de la tortilla began in Mexico in January 2007. The unexpected 75.5% increase in the cost of corn on the international market and the seeming shortage of enough of the grain to

satisfy domestic demand prompted an increase in the price of corn of between 42% and 67% (Rodríguez-Gómez 2007, 2008; Lustig 2008; Appendini 2008). This rise had an immediate negative impact on daily food consumption, since the Mexican diet has been historically based on the consumption of cheap *tortillas*.

The tortilla has long been an instrument used by the Mexican government to control urban working classes. As a central good in the Mexican diet, the tortilla has mostly had a fixed price, one which is usually below the cost of production for most rural farmers. This state-subsidized commodity therefore allows both urban and rural workers to access basic healthy food despite their poor salaries. As an illustration, consider the fact that a construction worker usually eats one kilogram of tortillas and one soda for breakfast, and the same as well as at lunch time. In 2008, for instance, 85.5% of peasants' units of production in the state of Mexico were still used to produce their tortillas for their household consumption (Appendini and Quijada 2013:144).

The price of tortillas went from \$3.50 pesos /kg to \$10-\$12/kg in January (Rodríguez-Gómez fieldwork notes 2007, 2008). By the end of this month, tortilla prices stabilized at \$8.50/kg as a fixed official price to be respected throughout the country -- despite differing rural/urban, regional/national or class spaces. This price was the result of conflicting negotiations among state agents, the most powerful leading actors in the corn-tortilla commodity chain (i.e. Maseca, Minsa, Gruma, Agroinsa),¹⁰ and national corn producers' associations, in the context of public demonstrations against the rising prices. Recall that, at that time, 49% of Mexico's corn imports were controlled by the largest Mexican corn-tortilla firms, cited above.¹¹ These largest corporations also had, and still have, power over the industrial production and distribution of tortillas (through *tortillerías*¹²) and, hence, on tortilla price and consumption. This explains their participation in the negotiations around fixing the price of tortillas.

A few weeks later, the largest supermarket chains, like Soriana and Wal-Mart, became active agents in coping with the food crisis. Yet, in contrast to the largest tortilla corporations and the *tortillerías*, these supermarkets went below the officially-fixed tortilla price. They sold their store-made fresh tortillas at a price range between \$5.60/kg-\$5.80/kg in their stores. In doing so, national and US-based retail food stores in Mexico contributed to the segmentation of the tortilla market. More importantly, these agents played a more significant role in setting the price of tortillas in medium and large cities than the regional and local *tortillerías* were able to.

¹⁰ These are the four Mexican grain marketing firms that have a growing control over corn dough and the tortilla industry and market during the last decade.

¹¹ As previously mentioned, today these powerful agribusinesses control 66% of Mexican corn production (Rubio 2013:58).

¹² *Tortillerías* are regional and local small industries which produce and sell fresh tortillas daily in urban neighborhoods. A few of them even sell fresh tortillas into the rural countryside.

This unexpected price increase for corn and tortillas led to two significant socio-cultural and political processes. First, it opened up a space for the overt resistance of thousands of rural and urban Mexicans against state policies, focusing on the call to protect native corn, small-scale farming, domestic agriculture, local food, and food sovereignty in Mexico. *Sin maíz no hay país y sin frijol tampoco* is an example of this resistance (ANEC 2008). These events also brought back the issue of Mexico's food security in relation to both neoliberal policies in general, and, in particular, the full opening of the Mexican market to corn, bean, and sugar imports from NAFTA partners that was to take place in January 2008.¹³ Mexico's growing dependence on US corn and bean imports was once again openly debated. Scholars like myself got engaged in efforts to construct a space in which food staple producers, legislators (*i.e.*, state and national deputies, as well as federal senators), academics, experts, and government officials from all over the country could share experiences, research results, knowledge, solutions, and agendas in order to collectively seek better-informed solutions, while asking for both a re-shaping of public policies for agriculture, food, and development in Mexico, and revision of NAFTA's Agriculture Chapter. These efforts, along with those of many other organized movements, such as *Sin maíz no hay país y sin frijol tampoco*, called into question state-led modernization along neoliberal lines – policies such as an economic development model based on reaching economies of scale; food importation replacing production for domestic consumption; a dynamic food export trade based on comparative and competitive advantage; and increasingly re-directing government support to large-scale, commercial, and export farming.

The world food crises, Mexico and the state-making in everyday life

The Mexican state played an important role in both the 2007 and 2008 food crises. As in many other countries, the state machinery immediately intervened in order to guarantee an adequate internal food supply (*i.e.*, India, see FAO 2008, 2008a, 2008b; World Bank 2007, 2008). In the Mexican case, the particular forms of state intervention illustrate the long-standing, systematic pattern of state intervention through public policy in modern Mexican agriculture and, consequently, in Mexican food and food ways. In other words, neoliberalism in Mexico (as elsewhere, I should add) has objectified a close (though dynamic and complex) relationship between market and state that characterized Mexican society even before the mid-1980s. In doing so, and contrary to what has been long argued by specialists on rural

¹³ January 1, 2008, brought about the complete trade liberalization of corn, beans, and sugar -- trade in milk was liberalized a couple of years before this date formally agreed under NAFTA (Rodríguez-Gómez 2012). It was the end of a 15-year tariff protection that had been given to Mexican corn, beans, milk, and sugar in recognition of "the price elasticity of these agricultural products" (Appendini 2008:5) and the acknowledgment of "the unequal conditions of production between the Mexican farmers and those of the US and Canada" (Rodríguez-Gómez 1998, 2007, 2007a, 2007b).

Mexico during the NAFTA period,¹⁴ the state has not actually withdrawn from the rural sector. Rather, it has maintained a regular, though contradictory, influence both on agriculture and the food market (production, distribution, consumption/demand, prices). The neoliberal state has launched public policies that selectively allow or discourage producers to continue with their “traditional” farming activities, particularly in the case of those producing staple food. Other policies push these farmers to switch to new agricultural activities through programs that promote and facilitate access to resources and/or new technology for some. Producers who don’t receive this aid (mostly small-scale farmers) can often no longer afford to practice “traditional” agriculture due to material constraints, even if they are commercial producers. The state has also at various times either encouraged citizens to consume domestically-produced food or promoted and supported consumption of imported food staples.¹⁵ The state can justify encouragement of staple food imports by the fact that this food is cheaper than that produced domestically, and it can support market ideas and actions by constructing a set of regulations and programs that follow international market logic. These include introducing quality standards and/or phytosanitary norms, and constructing domestic regulations according to global market principles of competition.

Most significantly for agriculture and, specifically, domestic staple food production in Mexico, the state has intervened by constructing policies by which either public resources or those of donors (i.e., World Bank, International Monetary Fund) are used to promote rural and urban poverty reduction programs (Interview with the former Vice-Minister of Mexican Agriculture). Indeed, some of their main targets have been small-scale farmers specializing in staple food production. Ironically, this has been made possible by the fact that under the neoliberal presidential terms (from 1988 on) **these farmers have been defined as “pobres” (poor) but no longer as “campesinos”** (staple food agricultural producers). The market principle of “efficiency and competitiveness versus inefficiency” has been the logic for defining them this way. As a result, these public policies for modernizing Mexican agriculture in the neoliberal global era are based on launching targeted social welfare programs rather than productive programs for small-scale farmers (see CEDRSSA 2006; Robles 2013; Rodríguez-Gómez 2004a, 2007, 2007b, 2008a).¹⁶ The point is that this kind of government welfare program does not invest in domestic

¹⁴ More recently, some scholars have taken a more balanced position in terms of the state withdrawal debate, as is the case with César Ramírez Miranda. This specialist has claimed the Mexican state abandoned its practices of *fomento agropecuario* (agricultural support, mostly for both staple food producers and traditional family farming) as a result of neoliberalism in Mexico even before the NAFTA agreement (2003:132). See also Rodríguez-Gómez 2007 and 2012.

¹⁵ Gross’s paper illustrates this process in the US case.

¹⁶ Programs for social development are focused on rural and urban populations living at poverty or extreme poverty levels. In the early 1980s, the first one, *Progresas*, was launched. In 1997, this program was re-formulated under the name *Oportunidades*. Through this technology of the ruling groups the state donates resources for poor people to buy some of the basic foods needed by the household. In return, the heads of these families have to take

staple agriculture and rarely provides small-scale farmers with material resources, knowledge, and technology to help them continue farming. Mexican welfare programs do not support either the creation of job opportunities or higher incomes from agriculture in rural areas. This is so because these programs focus on combating poverty rather than on strengthening productive capacities (human and material), economic activities, and, therefore, employment in rural Mexico (Robles 2009; CIESAS-CONEVAL 2013). Paradoxically, these welfare programs comprise 48% of the total rural sector state budget. In contrast, 24.9% of this portion of the budget goes to infrastructure; 22.4% is to support competitiveness in agriculture; 10.2% is for taking care of the environment; and 0.6% of the total goes to financing rural activities and labor (Robles 2009:16).

The most significant effect of these policies has been, first, the abandonment of agriculture as a primary economic activity by a significant number of small farmers. Rural households depending primarily on agricultural activities dropped from 2.5 million in 1992 to 0.5 million in 2006 (CEDRSSA 2006). This same process is illustrated by the significant reduction in both small-scale units of production and farmers working solely on agricultural activities (Ibid. 39-41). As a result, 79% to 80% of small-scale family farming household income is obtained through activities other than agriculture (Ramírez 2003:134). By the same token, the number of *jornaleros* (temporary, often migratory, agricultural workers, mostly laboring for export agriculture) grew from 600,000 a year in the 1980s to 3 million a year by 2005 (SEDESOL 2001; De Grammont 2004:15-16). Simultaneously, illegal labor migration to the US has “stabilized” at 400,000-500,000 people per year in the last ten years. In this vein, it is worth pointing out that from 1994 to 2005, 13 million rural young adults became part of the Mexican labor force; however, agricultural activities only offered 2.7 million jobs. These processes reveal the effects of transition towards a state that privileges importing staple food and agricultural goods as well as the trend to export agriculture (mainly to satisfy US demand for food) (Link in CEDRSSA 2006: 40).

From the 2007 *crisis de la tortilla* onward, Mexico has reinforced public policies like those described above. This, scholars claim, is how the state has directly contributed to increased inequality and socioeconomic polarization within groups of producers and among farming regions (Fox and Haight 2012; Robles 2013; Echánove 2013; Rodríguez-Gómez 2013), decreased

their children to school and must regularly visit health care centers. According to the latest report from the *Instituto Nacional de Estadísticas y Geografía* (INEGI), the percentage of Mexicans suffering from food insecurity grew from 9% in 2006 to 16% in 2008 (News report on TV 11; this result was validated by the National Ministry of Social Development, SEDESOL, in TV interviews and newspapers). We must remember that in 2006 49% of Mexicans were defined as poor and 36% of them lived in rural areas (CONEVAL 2013a). In 2012, there were 53.3 million Mexicans at the poverty level (45.5% out of the total population) (CONEVAL 2013:1; CONEVAL 2013b). In contrast, in 2010 there were 52.8 million (46.1% of the total population) (Ibid).

staple food cultivation (though this might not seem evident looking a special cases like Sinaloa), and an increase in both poverty and rural migration within and outside Mexico (Rodríguez-Gómez 2004, 2007; CEDRSSA 2006; Burstein 2007; Appendini 2008; Robles 2007). Analysis of these issues at the municipal level reveals an even starker contrast. To illustrate: six counties as a group received \$500 million from the state in 2007; in contrast, 1,788 counties received between \$1 and \$49 million each (Robles 2009: 19). Moreover, those farmers, counties, and states that have more intensive and high-tech agriculture (especially Sinaloa and, to some extent, Jalisco) received 80% of the state support directed to agriculture (Ibid.). In short, the 2007 and 2008 food crises in Mexico, as in other countries, have revealed one of the dark sides of neoliberalism in people’s daily lives: the acute growth of long-standing socioeconomic and power inequalities amongst farmers and regions.

NAFTA and its historical contexts in Mexico

NAFTA has been one of the most significant instruments for opening Mexico up to direct foreign investment and competition.¹⁷ Its enormous impact on Mexico’s food importation in the last four years is shown in Table and Graphic 1.

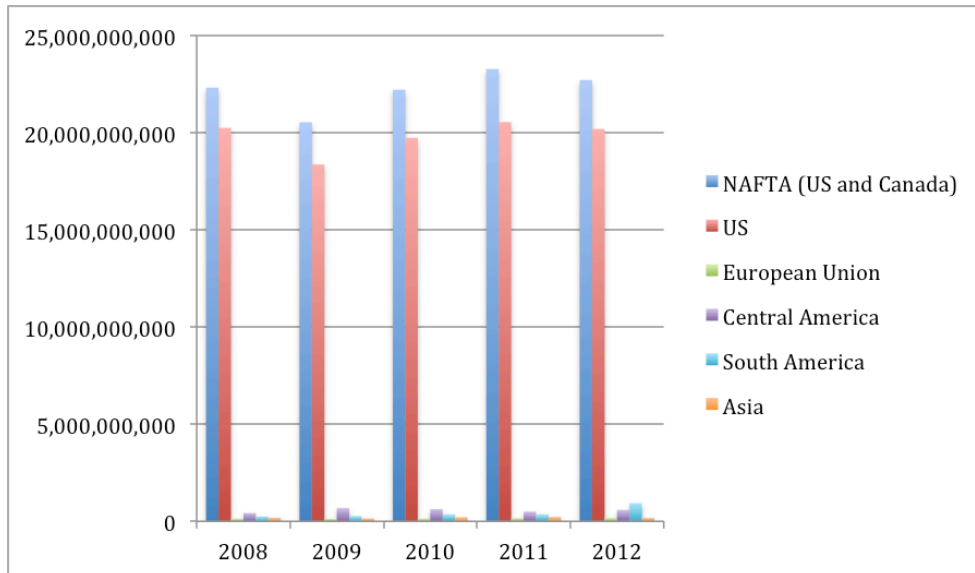
Table 1 Mexican food imports from its main trading partners, 2008-2012 (in tons)

Year	NAFTA (US and Canada)	US	European Union	Central America	South America	Asia
2008	22,319,930,622	20,248,377,252	141,960,228	426,083,546	246,943,618	188,214,666
2009	20,537,822,713	18,366,568,065	137,059,388	676,587,874	271,798,670	149,213,065
2010	22,212,730,871	19,740,076,425	150,838,370	625,887,374	362,037,715	215,971,585
2011	23,278,413,364	20,549,633,936	169,922,342	497,539,942	362,269,375	229,795,017
2012	22,710,078,786	20,194,360,339	184,302,738	587,996,536	934,499,212	173,797,078

¹⁷ NAFTA was the first of the 12 trade agreements that Mexico currently has with 44 countries (<http://www.economia.gob.mx/comunidad-negocios/comercio-externo/tlc-acuerdos>). The balance of Mexico’s food exports and imports reflects how significant these trade agreements have been, as shown by Table and Graphic 1).

Source: *Sistema de información comercial del sistema agroalimentario*, in http://sicagro.sagarpa.gob.mx/SICAGRO_CONSULTA/filtros.aspx

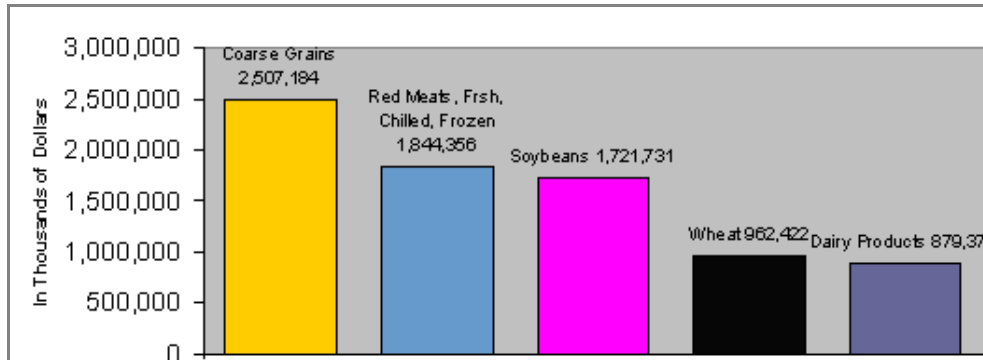
Graphic 1 - Mexican food imports from its main trading partners, 2008-2012



Source: *Sistema de información comercial del sistema agroalimentario*, in http://sicagro.sagarpa.gob.mx/SICAGRO_CONSULTA/filtros.aspx

As shown above, Mexico is indeed “the United States second largest agricultural trading partner with bilateral trade equal to over \$20 billion [dollars]” (<http://www.fas.usda.gov/country/Mexico/Mexico.asp>). The lowering of import barriers to specific agricultural commodities (such as corn, beef, soy, wheat, sorghum, and dairy products) has created a major increase in Mexico’s cheap imports of such products as grains and oil, in general, and corn and dairy products, in particular, from the heavily subsidized US agribusinesses and farmers (Puyana 2008:163; Rodríguez-Gómez 2012:184-185). As an illustration, Graphic 2 shows the main products Mexico imports from the US:

Graphic 2 - Top U.S. Exports of Agriculture, Fish and Forestry Products to Mexico – CY 2008



Source: <http://www.fas.usda.gov/country/Mexico/Top%20US%20Exports%20to%20Mexico.gif>

According to the United States Department of Agriculture, Mexico is the top US “export destination for beef, rice, soybean, sugars and sweeteners, apples and dry edible mean exports. It is the second market for horticultural products, and third largest for pork, poultry and eggs” (<http://wwwfas.usda.gov/country/Mexico/Mexico.asp>).

In order to apprehend the difference between the volumes of food imported, as well as the relative volume of food that Mexico imports from the US in relation to other main trading partners, we may take cheese as an example:

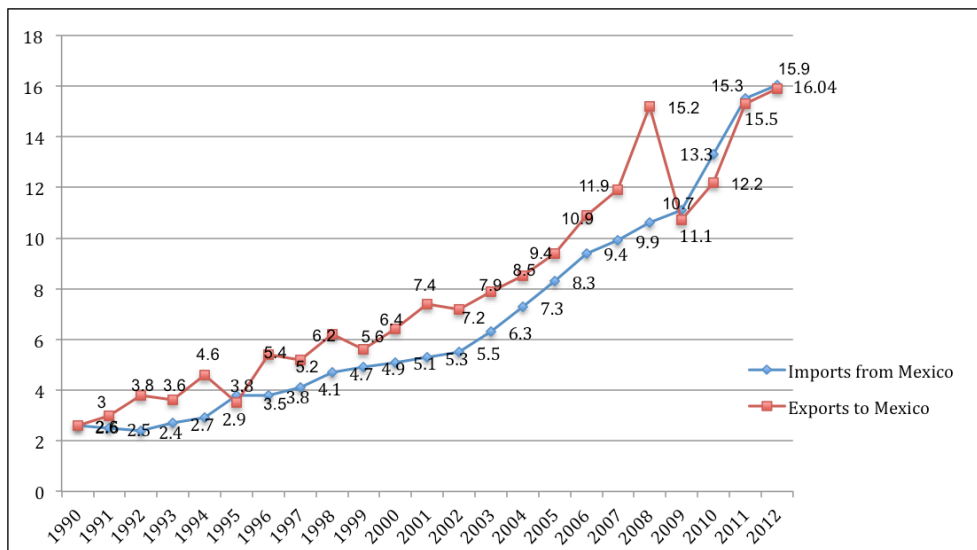
Table 2 - Cheese imports from Mexico’s main trading partners (tons/\$1,000USD)

Country	2001	2003	2005	2009	2011	2012
US	251,855	113,105	110,056	42,944,994	51,005,445	66,147,697
New Zealand	8,944,055	12,732,218	9,508,015	6,192,071	4,016,493	3,860,950
Canada	844,167	225,202	1,122,512	No data available	No data available	50,721
Chile	2,940,225	4,961,710	17,334,610	8,614,396	9,012,308	6,072,212
Others	22,294,465	28,618,683	19,189,063	21,484,615	17,992,964	16,971,544
Total	35,274,767	46,650,918	47,264,256	79,236,076	82,027,210	93,103,124

Sources: *Canada Dairy Information Center*, in <http://www.dairy.info.gc.ca> and *Sistema de información del sector agroalimentario*, in http://sicagro.sagarpa.gob.mx/SICAGRO_CONSULTA/filtros.aspx

The volume of imports of what Mexicans consider staple foods has likewise increased dramatically since NAFTA. From 1994 to 2001, for example, the value of agricultural and cattle products imported by Mexico grew by 86.5%; conversely, our exports grew by 81% (Appendini et al. 2003:72). This has had a negative impact of 1.5 thousand million pesos on our food trade balance (Ibid.). Thus, Mexico has had an increasing deficit in terms of agricultural and food product trade with the US (Yúñez-Naude et al. 2004), and this unequal food trading relation still prevails. Indeed, Mexican food exports to the US market have grown more slowly than imports of food from our closest neighbor, as showed in Graphic 3 and 4.

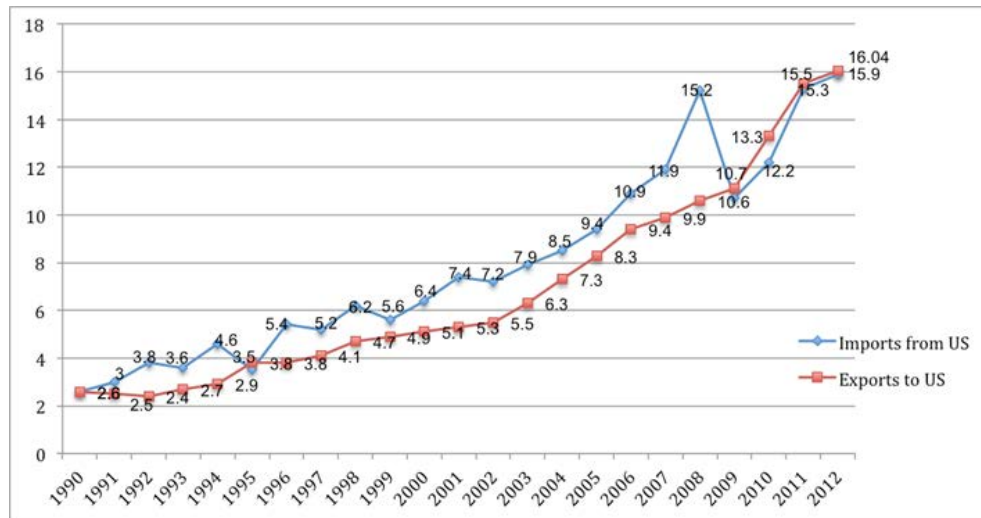
Graphic 3 - U. S. Agricultural Trade with Mexico 1990-2012 (Billions of U.S. Dollars)



Source: United States Census Bureau, in: <http://www.census.gov/foreign-trade/statistics/product/enduse/exports/c2010.html>; see also: Burstein 2007: 5.

Despite the fact that Mexico’s food exports have grown more slowly than our imports, they have been increasing in the last two years, as shown in Graphic 4.

Graphic 4 - Mexican food exports were lower than the amount of food imported from US (Billions of U.S. Dollars)



Source: United States Census Bureau, in: <http://www.census.gov/foreign-trade/statistics/product/enduse/exports/c2010.html>

The growing specialization of Mexican agriculture in export products can be seen in direct relation to the decrease in cereals production in some regions of the country. A case in point is agricultural production in Chiapas. From 1986 to 2008 the total area of land used for producing soy, cacao, and corn declined by 60%, 27%, and 23%, respectively (Fletes et al. 2013:218). The area of land on which coffee and sorghum were produced also decreased (Ibid.). In contrast, the amount of land for cultivating mango, bananas, African palm, and sugar (all exports) increased significantly. Fletes et al. argues that, in Chiapas, agriculture for exports and industry grew in direct relation to the decline of cultivation of staple foods (2013:216-218). This trend can also be seen in the fact that, in 1980, 1.2 million hectares were dedicated to horticultural crops for export (6.8% of total agricultural land); by 2009 there were 1.95 million hectares, representing 8.9% of the total (González 2013:23). From 1980 to 2009,¹⁸ Mexican agriculture for export grew by an annual average of 1.8%. In sharp contrast, cultivation of cereals fell by 1.1%, and agriculture dedicated to industrial products grew by a mere 0.1% (Ibid.).

Table 3 shows some of the changes in Mexican agricultural production before and during the NAFTA period.

Table 3 - Agricultural production in México 1980-2011

¹⁸ From 1990 to 1997, for instance, agricultural production of staple foods for internal consumption grew by 1.27% annually (Rubio 2013:19). In contrast, that for exportation had an increased growth rate of 2.92% (Ibid.).

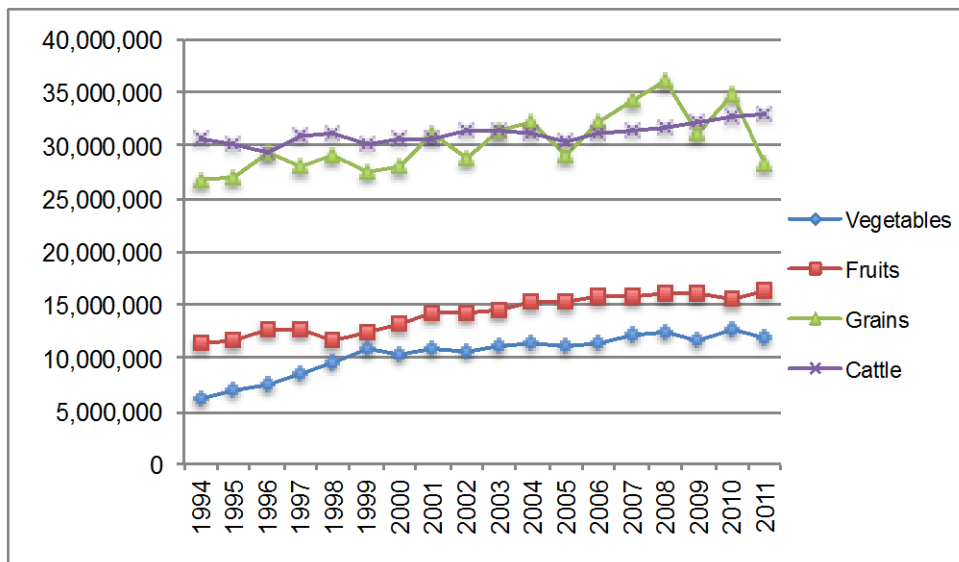
Tons	1980	1993	2000	2005	2010	2011
Beans	935,174	1,287,573	887,868	826,892	1,156,251	567,779
Milk*	55,400	84,108	322,002	388,710	433,630	433,630
Corn	12,374,400	18,125,264	17,556,900	19,338,700	23,301,879	17,635,417
Horticultural crops	11,912,835	16,994,631	23,575,474	26,440,709	28,031,993	28,160,567

*Milk includes cow’s milk: skimmed, evaporated, condensed and dry.

Source: FAOSTAT (2013), in <http://faostat.fao.org/site/603/DesktopDefault.aspx?PageID=603#ancor>

By the same token, Graphic 5 illustrates the difference in patterns in production for export (most horticultural crops) and production for internal consumption (most beans, milk, and corn) in Mexico from 1994 to 2011.

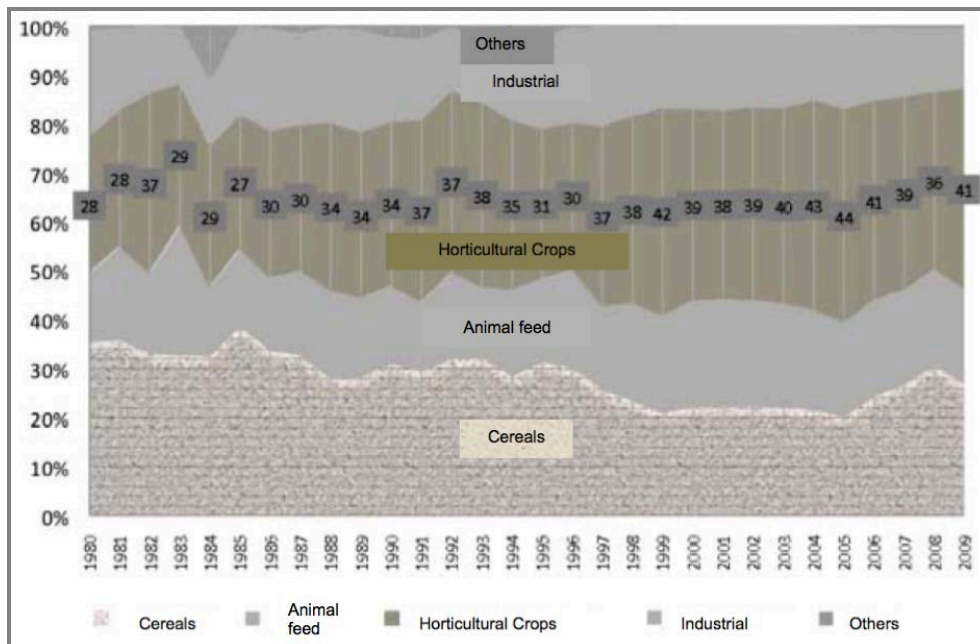
Graphic 5 - Mexico’s production of domestic and export agriculture from NAFTA (1994) to 2011 (in tons*)



Source: FAOSTAT 2013: Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, URL: <http://faostat.fao.org>. *Cattle is measured as stock.

Here we see, first, a slight decrease in domestically produced staple foods (i.e., grains and cattle), and, simultaneously, an increase in production of food for the international market (i.e., vegetables and fruits). Second, the boost in producing high-value export crops (e.g., vegetables, fruits, flowers, and spices) goes hand in hand with the resources the Mexican state gives out (mostly to the more affluent farmers in the country) through targeted public policies oriented to medium- and large-scale commercial farmers (Fox and Haight 2012; González 2013). This increase in export agriculture is related as well to both the fact that the value of horticultural crops has grown in relation to that of grains and an increase in demand for these products by US society.

Graphic 6 - Value of Mexican food production in terms of types of agriculture 1980-2009



Source: González 2013: 28.

In regard to Mexican internal production of basic food, corn production grew by 20.44%, while cultivated land for corn decreased by 14.26%. The latter process did not have such a negative effect, since corn productivity grew by 62% from 1980 to 2006 (González and Macías 2007). However, it has been pointed out that internal consumption and livestock production also increased so that, despite the rise in productivity, Mexico has had to import corn to be used both by the larger food processing industries, and as cattle feed. At this point we must remember that yellow maize is used to feed cattle. It is said that yellow maize, rather than white, is one of the main inputs used by agroindustries like Maseca and Minsa — despite the

fact that they claim not to use yellow maize to produce either industrial tortillas or nixtamal¹⁹. In contrast, white maize is intended primarily for human consumption. It is the primary ingredient of tortillas. Furthermore, white maize, along with 59 native maize landraces, is the basic ingredient of nearly 600 food preparations (Turrent et al. 2012:2-9).

Back to the point, from 1990 to 2010, Mexico doubled its maize production (Robles 2010 in Turrent et al. 2012: 9). Indeed, in the period of 2006-2010 the annual production averaged 22.7 million tons (Turrent et al. 2012:9). This is “a considerable accomplishment given economic shocks to the sector following adoption... of NAFTA” (Wise in Turrent et al. 2012:9). This increase in Mexican maize production in the last decade is even more significant if we take into account the fact that staple food prices for domestic growers decreased by 52.7% from 1991 to 2006 (Appendini 2009).

This staple food price decrease in Mexico is directly linked to the dynamic of prices in the global market for these products. Ironically, one of the explanations of this close relationship lies in the Mexican state’s neoliberal policies. The *Apoyos y Servicios a la Comercialización Agropecuaria* (ASERCA) program is a paradigmatic illustration. At the end of the 1990s,²⁰ this program was launched (1) to directly support a close relationship between producers and consumers (cutting out intermediaries); (2) to promote the creation of Mexican agroindustries; and (3) to encourage commercial production of staple foods through a new form of direct subsidies similar to those given by other countries to their producers (González 1991 in Mendoza 2011:109; Rodríguez-Gómez 2002:234).²¹ By 2000, ASERCA, following the lead of the most powerful Mexican grain corporations, adopted the prices established by the Chicago Board of Trade as the model for calculating the prices paid and received by those participating in *agricultura por contrato* (a commercial relationship between the agrifood corporations and the producers who sell their grains to them, a relationship in which the state intervenes by

¹⁹ *Nixtamal* is dried maize kernels that have been treated to with an alkali to prepare them to be made into dough.

²⁰ This period was key for Mexican agriculture since it was the end of the state marketing agency *Compañía Nacional de Subsistencias Populares S. A.*, (CONASUPO). CONASUPO was a corner stone for small- medium-, and large-scale grain producers alike, both before and in the transitional stage of changing to neoliberalism in Mexico. This was the case even though CONASUPO’s policies resulted in “a relative price distortion favoring corn [producers]” (Appendini 1996:6). The dismantling of this agency “...was clearly a negotiation with medium and small farmers, more for social and political reasons since trade liberalization would have had an adverse impact on millions of corn producers (Ibid.).

²¹ Hank Gonzalez was, at that time, the Minister of the Mexican Department of Agriculture. By creating ASERCA he aimed for Mexican farmers to be as competitive as the producers of those countries with whom Mexico began trading first under the GATT (1986) and then under NAFTA (1994). ASERCA began by supporting private sector efforts to construct or take advantage of CONASUPO’s infrastructure for storing staple food. In the early 1990s, it intervened in the staple food price policy subsidizing grain producers every now and then (Mendoza 2011:107-114). By 2000, CONASUPO had been dismantled and ASERCA became the main state office in charge of managing direct public support to grain producers (Ibid. 115). ASERCA indeed embodied trade liberalization since tariffs substitute import quotas (Appendini 1996).

providing a fixed amount of pesos for the transaction to take place) (Mendoza 2011:116-120). This explains why I and others, including the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OCDE), argue that Mexican agriculture, and particularly that specialized in maize production, is more exposed than ever to the fluidity and contradictions of global trade (2011:4). This has a negative impact on maize production, commercialization, and consumption in Mexico. When combined with the crises in international grain prices in 2007 and 2008, this explains the emergence of opposition movements like *Sin maíz no hay país* in Mexico and the world at large. In this vein, “resistance” by distinctive rural and urban actors “most affected [in their daily lives] by the dysfunctional global [and national] food system[s] is essential in order to build a real and genuinely humane alternative” (Amin 2011:xiii).

There is no doubt of the importance of the increase in Mexican production of maize mentioned above. Yet, at this point in time, this increase has not been enough to satisfy national “apparent demand”, since that would require an average production of it requires 32.7 million per year (Turrent et al. 2012:9). That is, Mexican society, agribusinesses, and cattle activities require 10 million tons more maize than the average amount produce internally (Ibid.).

There are three issues we have to keep in mind to understand this maize deficit in Mexico today. First, rising demand for yellow maize mainly for cattle production (Ibid.). Second, Mexican producers actually “largely satisfy Mexico’s demand for white maize” (Ibid.). Third, government officials, large-scale regional farmers, and agents of the most powerful national and transnational Mexican and foreign agribusiness keep claiming, as they did before neoliberalism was embraced by our state, that production of basic goods in Mexico has significantly decreased due to most farmers’ inefficiency (i.e., low productivity) and lack of competitiveness. This discourse has been historically used to legitimize food imports to Mexico (Hewitt 1974). However, **low productivity is not necessarily the only reason for legitimizing the substitution of internal production with imported grains.**²²

In sharp contrast to the discourse of dominant, Antonio Yunez has shown **that small-scale production of corn has increased since NAFTA came into effect** (Yunez in Burstein 2007:13). This scholar goes so far as to claim that **this process is the embodiment of a resurgence of the peasant economy based upon the production of staple food.**

In this regard, Robles argues that small-scale agriculture is key for Mexican agriculture and for the rural sector at large due the following: First, the fact that is productive units (PU) made up

²² It is important to clarify that Mexican wheat productivity is higher than that of the US farmers (Appendini 2009:22). By the same token, the largest commercial producers of maize have a productivity level similar to that of its competitors –mainly those in the US (Turrent et al. 2012).

of five hectares or fewer offer 56.8% of rural agricultural jobs employing family members as well as hired workers (Robles 2013:3-4).²³ Indeed, if we add to these, those PUs between five and ten hectares, these farms offer 74.1% of the agricultural employment (Ibid.). In sharp contrast, those PUs boasting more than 100 hectares hired only 7.9% of the agricultural workers (Ibid.). Second, these small- and medium-scale actors make a significant contribution to the national production of grains (mainly to maize and to edible dry beans).²⁴ They contribute 39% of Mexico's maize production (Turrent et al. 2012:7). Third, small-scale farmers (PUs of fewer than five hectares) sell their products to the most powerful agribusinesses –thus, contributing significantly to the national and international success of these corporations (Ibid. 1, 5). These multidimensional contributions are carried out by the 67.8% of farms that have an extension of five hectares or less, out of 4 millions, 069 thousands, and 938 total PUs that carried out agricultural and/or forestry activities in Mexico in 2007, according to that year's Censo Agropecuario y Forestal (INEGI 2007). They manage this on only 16% of Mexico's agricultural land (Ibid. 1).

It is very important to note that small scale farmers' multidimensional contribution to Mexico's agriculture and food, as described above, happen despite the fact that these are the very producers of maize and beans that get extremely limited state support either for their productive activities or for the improvement of their material and technical capacities (Ibid. 1, 2, 5, 8-9).²⁵ Indeed, "this is a sector that has limited access to formal credit, lacks irrigation, and has received little in the way of extension services in the last two decades" (Turrent et al 2012:12). All these conditions explain why they operate at less than 50% of potential (Ibid. 2). Despite this lack of crucial support for making their activities more efficient and productive, seven out of ten are producers of white and yellow maize and/or six out of ten produce beans (Ibid. 2). Finally, small scale farming of staple food has have grown significantly in the last 80 years contrary to the goals of Mexico's long time agricultural policies (Ibid. 2). Small PUs have increased from 332,000 in 1930 to 2.6 million in 2007 (Ibid.). In sum, **they represent the main characteristic of the agricultural and forestry sector in Mexico nowadays** (Ibid.).

During the NAFTA period, Mexican farmers have had to deal with the 52.7% reduction in the price of corn (Appendini 2009). In this vein, various studies have long shown that US agricultural subsidies have consistently topped Mexican subsidies (Rodríguez-Gómez 2007; González and Macías 2007; Burstein 2007; Appendini 2009). This is because the main goal of US agriculture is to produce more food than what is needed internally, in order to control the

²³ Agriculture at large employs 13% of Mexico's labor force (CIESAS-CONVEAL 2013:1): 3.3 million are "independent producers" and 4.6 million are paid workers or relatives who do not receive any salary (OCDE, 2011:4).

²⁴ IICA. 2012. *Aportes del IICA a la gestión del conocimiento de la agricultura en México*, in Robles 2013:2).

²⁵ Ibid.

world market and agriculture by offering cheap surplus US food abroad. As Rubio has shown, US farmers received an average of \$20,800 USD in state subsidies in 1994 (2003:22). In contrast, agricultural producers in the European Union got \$16,000, and Mexican farmers received just \$720 (Ibid.). More importantly, as Burstein points out, “since both US and Mexican subsidies tend to favor larger producers disproportionately, small-scale Mexican farmers are doubly disadvantaged by the existing subsidy regimes in the two countries” (2007:13).

On top of these economic explanations, there are historical conditions, characteristics, and consequences of Mexican public policies that also help to explain why agriculture has drastically changed in the last three decades. In this vein, the leading dominant groups mentioned before seek to minimize the fact that neoliberal policies in Mexico favor competitive commercial producers of food staples and agricultural commodities for foreign markets (i.e., horticultural crops). In doing so, they base their neoliberal policies on an open exclusion of most small- and medium-scale farmers, who do not use high-tech farming practices or produce agricultural commodities for export. They also ignore those farmers who lack access to credit, technical assistance, and information, as well as those who lack access to the social networks of powerful groups. As an illustration, those farmers who live in highly marginal rural counties get 8.4% of available state credit, while those who live in counties that have the lowest degree of marginality get 56.6% of public sources targeted to support commercial agriculture (Robles 2009:14). A study has shown that the counties in which high-tech, commercial staple food agriculture and/or export agriculture are carried out by medium- to large-scale powerful farmers are the ones that receive higher levels of state resources (Ibid. 18). The counties of Sinaloa and Oaxaca are a paradigmatic illustration (Ibid. 20).²⁶ In 2007, Culiacan, Sinaloa, in Northwestern Mexico, got \$612 million pesos, while Etila, Oaxaca, in the South, got \$244,000 (Ibid. 19). Not surprisingly, members of the regional power groups of Northwestern Mexico produce 2/3 of the white corn used mainly as food (particularly tortillas) in Mexico. They also produce 20% of the domestic output as a whole (Ita in Appendini 2009).

In this vein, **it is worth recalling that agricultural activities currently contribute only 10% of the total income of small-scale farming households** (Burstein 2007:8; see also Robles 2007). This amount has decreased by 20% in the last 15 years (Burstein 2007:6). Yet, most of the 2 million small-scale farmers, and many of the 700 thousand medium-scale ones, still eat corn as their main consumable. In other words, the corn-tortilla diet persists even though the majority of rural households no longer are agriculturally-based. This has a twofold explanation. First, state policies that fail to aid small-scale agriculture mean that these producers have to buy most of their food. Secondly, 90% of these producers’ non-agricultural income comes from

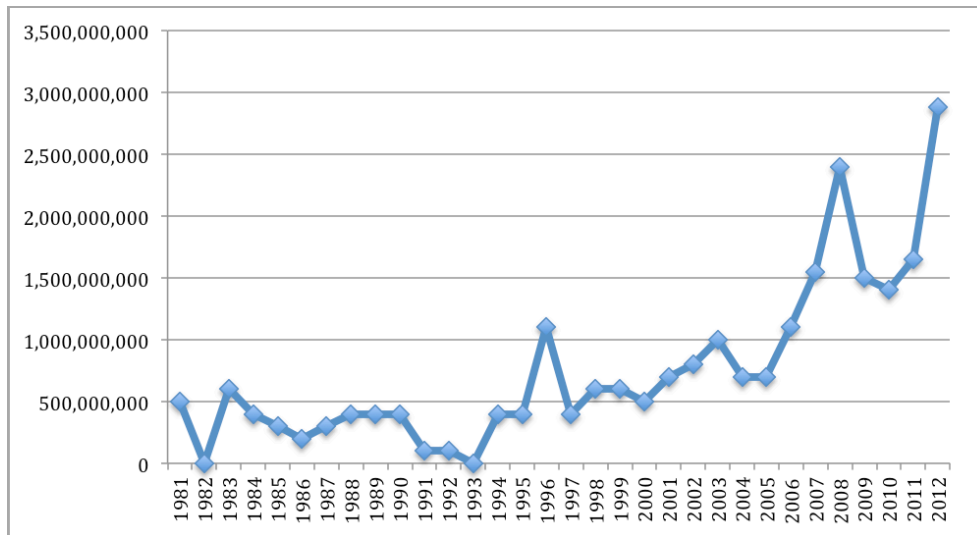
²⁶ Ten percent of Sinaloa’s large-scale farmers as a group get 50-60% of all state resources used to support commercial farming in Mexico (Ita in Appendini 2009:69).

international remittances, non-farm work, and state transfers (i.e., *Oportunidades, Programa de Apoyo Directo al Campo, PROCAMPO*²⁷). So, they have cash for buying their food. Thus, ironically, *direct intervention of the state in agriculture has transformed them from **food producers** to **food consumers***. Consequently, these households are more vulnerable to changes in staple food prices both domestically and globally.

On top of that, from 1993 to 2006 the price of tortillas increased by 733% in the Mexican countryside (González and Macías 2006). This rise had a particularly negative impact on farming households' incomes and their diets, since rural inflation was 376% higher than the rate of inflation in urban areas (Ibid.). Moreover, while inflation has been constantly high, wages in the countryside have not increased significantly. So, most farmers have watched their incomes erode. As a result, access to and consumption of staple food has been endangered. Those who still produce their main foods in small plots for self-consumption may be *relatively* cushioned from fluctuations in staple food prices – prices that are directly connected to those of the Chicago Board of Trade, as explained before. But, given the position of the majority of small-scale producers as food consumers dependent on outside aid for to eat, a sudden, sharp increase in staple cereal prices like the ones that characterized the 2007 and 2008 food crises can have a tremendous negative impact on these households' ability to purchase food. The increase in the price of basic foods has forced members of these rural households, as well as those of working and middle-class urban families, to eat less.

Again, vulnerability of the daily basic diet in Mexico since NAFTA is explained by the growing dependency of Mexico on the staple food global market. The growing food dependency is also the result of food imports above the tariff-free quota, prompted by Mexico's food insecurity (Appendingini 2009:67). As an illustration, one of the former leading members of the Mexican Department of Agriculture stated that the amount of corn imported from the US had gone from 1.3 million tons in 1993 to 5.7 million in 2005. In contrast, he explained that domestic production of corn went from 16.9 million tons in 1993 to 19.2 million in 2005 (Mendoza-Zazueta 2006). Graphic 7 illustrates the critical increase of maize imports from 1994 on.

²⁷ PROCAMPO is a state program launched in 1993. It was conceived as an instrument to support farmers in proportion to the number of hectares they own. Those who have larger plots get higher subsidies. PROCAMPO was originally designed to support only those farmers cultivating maize. Years later, bean producers were added, as were those with pasture lands.

Graphic 7 - Corn imports to Mexico 1981-2012 (in USD)

Source: Source: FAOSTAT 2013: Food and agriculture organization of the United Nations, URL: <http://faostat.fao.org>; see also: Burstein 2007:12

For the last two decades, the Mexican state has justified the increased imports of corn, beans, wheat, and rice by claiming that they are cheaper than those produced domestically. The ruling groups have indeed defined, while establishing, food security in Mexico as based upon free trade, the open food market, and targeted state subsidies for the most competitive farmers. This way of presenting food security has brought about ever-greater exclusion of small-scale producers, as well as stagnation of a good deal of medium-scale staple farming in most agricultural regions. This is significant, since 3 million farmers cultivate maize in Mexico. Yet, only 10% of these producers are large-scale farmers. Small-scale corn producers represent 67% of the total, and 23% are medium-scale farmers (CIESAS-CONEVAL 2013:1-3; RIMISP 2013:2). In this vein, the NAFTA period must be seen as a catalyst through which state formation and capitalism in Mexico intertwined in such a way that socioeconomic and power polarization escalated dramatically and, therefore, that uneven social and geographical (i.e., local, regional, and federal state) development became more pronounced than in previous decades (see the analysis of specific agricultural policies which support this finding: Puyana 2008; Fox and Haight 2012; Echánove 2013; Robles 2013; Rodríguez-Gómez 2013, among others).

Another fundamental and contradictory outcome of neoliberalism is the growth of private oligopolies organized around basic agricultural inputs and foods, such as corn. This is because, as Harvey explains, “competition often results in monopoly or oligopoly” (2008:67). Specialists in Mexican agriculture have long argued that privatization of commercialization in agriculture opened up the space for the development of two monopolistic groups, at least since the 1980s.

On the one hand, the closing down of the state corn- and bean-marketing firm (like CONASUPO) in the 1990s, allowed members of regional dominant groups (i.e., large-scale commercial farmers in Sinaloa and Jalisco) to set prices for staple grains (i.e., corn and beans) (Rodríguez-Gómez 2006). Since then, a small group of corn-flour industries (i.e., Maseca, Minsa, Agroinsa, Bimbo) has gained control over both internal maize production and corn imports, which ensures a highly concentrated agroindustry. Indeed, from 2008 on, Maseca and Minsa have been able to impose such coercive power on competition in the Mexican staple food market because the Mexican state has allowed them to freely import the corn they require for their industrial activities (Appendini 2009). This explains how Maseca and Minsa produce and control an extraordinary 80-90% of the corn flour and supplies needed by both traditional and modern tortilla industries within and beyond Mexican borders.

Finally, neoliberalism has also opened up space for a small group of farmers' associations to play a role in grain marketing – particularly in the case of corn (Santillanes 2008; Rodríguez-Gómez 2006; Rodríguez-Gómez and Torres 1996). However, few of these farmers' organizations have been able to reach a national level of operations. The *Asociación Nacional de Empresas Campesinas* (ANEC) is a case in point. Paradoxically, and in radical contrast to the other corn-flour agents cited above, ANEC has been playing a leading role in, first, promoting overt resistance to the full opening of the Mexican food market through NAFTA and, simultaneously, exploring Mexico's food sovereignty issues as they relate to popular concerns and understandings of modern *Mexicanidad*.

Sin maiz no hay pais: Overt protest and Mexico's neoliberal state

The *crisis de la tortilla* confronted rural and urban Mexicans alike with sharp price increases on their staple foods. As Appendini has argued, the grain price increase (specifically that of maize) was not the result of a period of staple food scarcity in Mexico (2009:69). Rather, it came about as a product of the unexpected escalation of staple food prices in the international market (see Rodríguez-Gómez 2007a,2009,2009a; FAO 2008, 2008a, 2008b; World Bank 2007, 2008). However, for most rural and urban groups and individual actors, the tortilla crisis was just one of the many negative consequences of free trade in general and NAFTA in particular. So, the immediate effect of the crisis was an explosion of expressions of popular discontent. Consequently, members of rural and urban popular groups organized protests and demonstrations as overt resistance against the neoliberal trend of the Mexican state and the dominant groups in the main cities.

Scholars and students, as well as urban working and middle-class sympathizers, who rejected most neoliberal policies carried out by the Mexican state over the last decades, joined this

struggle, led by farmers' organizations like ANEC. Indeed, in January 31, 2007, they signed the *Pacto Político por la Soberanía Alimentaria y Energética, los Derechos de los trabajadores y las Libertades democráticas (Political Pact for Food and Energy Sovereignty, Workers' Rights, and Democratic Freedoms)*. One of their goals was **to call on Mexican authorities to prohibit maize privatization through the cultivation of genetically modified corn**. This claim was a way of rejecting the recently approved law that allowed the use of GM seeds in specific regions of corn and cotton production. This regulation is popularly known as the *Monsanto Law*. Of course, this law was presented by dominant groups as a means of coping with the apparent shortage in staple foods revealed by the 2007 tortilla crisis. However, according to adherents of the Political Pact for Mexico Food and Energy Sovereignty, such a proposal imperils native maize cultivation. They hold out native maize as one of the natural treasures of Mexican society, in particular, and of humanity, at large. Members of popular opposition movements also argued that Mexico is the genetic reservoir of pure native maize seeds that could combat starvation. In this vein, corn was defined as a key element of both democracy and *modern* nationhood in Mexico. This document was legitimized by 408,000 signatures, including signatures of members of 200 farmers' associations and universal civil rights organizations.

Despite the alliances made early on between the state and the powerful national and transnational corn and flour industries, and later between the state and the largest national and transnational supermarket chains, to fix tortilla prices so that rural and urban citizens could afford their daily diet, diverse forms of collective action continued, and the protest agenda kept growing. By June 2007, more than 300 associations had put together the *Campaña Nacional para la defensa de la Soberanía Alimentaria de México (National Campaign to Defend Mexican Food Sovereignty)*, a campaign also designed to re-activate small-scale and traditional agriculture in Mexico (Rodríguez-Gómez 2007 field notes). This was the moment that the *Sin maíz no hay país y sin frijol tampoco* movement was formally born (Ibid.).

Some of the key icons of Mexico, such as maize and beans, were appropriated as symbols of protest. Their meanings, however, were directly opposed to the meanings given these icons by dominant groups. For members of popular resistance groups, maize was presented as part of the historical origin of modern Mexico that should be preserved. As such, corn was the basis of food security and food sovereignty. It included the different varieties of maize cultivated in various Mexican regions, not just the varieties commercially cultivated in Sinaloa and Jalisco. For all these reasons, popular groups claimed that native corn and small-scale, traditional agriculture should be protected from adulteration by GM seed varieties. This is because native corn and local food could be put at risk, these groups argued, cancelling out any potential economic and environmental benefits of GMOs claimed (but not necessarily scientifically proven) by transnational agrifood corporations. Thus, the *Sin maíz no hay país y sin frijol*

tampoco movement was appropriated, re-framed, and interwove both official and traditional popular understandings of these cultural forms of Mexico and *Mexicanidad*. Their claim challenged neoliberal and global principles and practices while opposing an alternative form of modernization broadly used in the US: GMO-based cultivation of staple food. Interestingly, the movement's rejection of North Americans policies and practices reflected similar resistance by the European Union and New Zealand, among others.

By supporting domestic maize production as the corner stone of both Mexico self-sufficiency and sovereignty, these popular groups called into question the change made by the Mexico neoliberal state to support the introduction of genetically modified corn seeds. They also openly challenged the neoliberal trend of replacing traditional and small-scale staple food cultivation with imported food supplied by the US, Mexico's strongest commercial partner. In one particularly dramatic demonstration, these critical groups gathered at the core of Mexico's social, economic, political, religious, and symbolic power: Mexico City's Zocalo. Chanting "*Pon a Mexico en tu boca*" (literally: **Put Mexico in your mouth**) they built a map of Mexico in Mexico City's zócale using different varieties of Mexican native corn. During this protest, the leaders of *Sin maiz no hay pais y sin frijol tampoco* declared:

With these [different varieties of domestic maize] seeds, we seek to connect urban settlements with the diverse forms in which our staple food is produced. It is key to re-evaluate our staple food farmers' work, as well as the biodiversity that our native corn represents, since both are threatened by free trade, the potential use of genetically engineered seeds in Mexican agriculture, and the use of corn to produce biofuels (http://www.webislam.com/articulos/32036-sin_maiz_no_hay_pais_campana_alimentaria_en_mexico.html)

This popular performance embodied the complex intertwining of the historical and the current, the popular and the state, and official meanings, symbols and practices that was carried out by members of subaltern and dominant groups alike. *Sin maíz no hay país y sin frijol tampoco* was using popular and official cultural forms of *mexicanidad* to produce a new and fresh national identity. Within this identity popular opposition through overt resistance joined forces with public negotiation to attempt to re-frame corn, small agriculture, local food, and food sovereignty as goods (commodities), ideas, practices, and traditions still playing a significant role in the making of Mexico neoliberal state after NAFTA.

A closing point

The Mexican state continues to play a key role as an intermediary and regulator of the agricultural and food market. Likewise, it still promotes policies to facilitate access to food for most Mexicans – though the urban population continues to be its main target

However, *Sin maíz no hay país y sin frijol tampoco* and other groups claim that state programs have not solved the problem, since the ongoing economic global and internal food crises have decreased most Mexican households' incomes and continued to increase food prices. As a result, a significant number of families have even less money to buy food. Indeed, from 2008-2010, poverty grew from 48.8% to 52.0% of Mexico's total population. Consequently, the population without sufficient access to food increased from 21.7% to 24.9% in the same period (CONEVAL 2010). By 2012, there went 53.3% poor. As cited before, 61.6% Mexicans living in rural areas at in poverty (CONEVAL:22). This is both a terrible paradox of neoliberalism in our country that has not been resolved yet and a significant challenge to Mexican state, society, and scholars.

Popular movements keep struggling against Mexico's food crises and agricultural public policies, while asking for preservation of local and traditional agriculture. Simultaneously, scholars, along with members of the National Chambers of Deputies and the Mexican senate, continue to put together conferences and construct polyphonic arenas in order to address these important issues surrounding both Mexican food sovereignty and the right of all Mexicans to high-quality food. There have been spaces created in which small- and medium-scale farmers, leaders of farmers' formal organizations, NGO agents, and local and federal deputies and national senators can get together to exchange and discuss scientific, technical, and local knowledge, experiences, strategies, agendas to try collectively to impact policy making.

Interestingly, *Sin maíz no hay país*, along with the other movements, carried their demands further. By 2010, these different groups and actors were able to pool their efforts in order to begin a fight for a constitutional amendment that would guarantee the right to quality food for all citizens, across cultural and class differences. Hence, in 2011, Mexican constitutional Articles 4 and 27 were amended to include "the right for food for all Mexicans alike" (Rodríguez-Gómez 2012). Few months later of the Constitutional Amendment, members of *Sin maíz no hay país* as well as scholars, national deputies and senators, producers and NGOs have gotten together again in order to create the *Frente Parlamentario contra el Hambre, Capítulo México* (Parliamentarian Front Against Hunger, Mexican Chapter).

There have been several accomplishments of the *Sin maíz no hay país* movement so far. Yet, as Pablo said in the opening of this presentation it seems that “There has been no impact. Nothing has changed at all [as a result of our collective actions]...”

I am tempted to agree with Pablo’s ending comment. However, this very presentation and other (scholarly and non-academic) actions are indeed part of a larger movement of rural and urban Mexicans who keep struggling for the improvement of material, knowledge, and living conditions of most producers that support Mexico’s agriculture(s); the reduction of poverty and the search for working opportunities for those 61.6% Mexicans who are at the poverty level in rural areas; the re-positioning of small-scale farming and domestic markets in Mexican society and state; and for the re-structuring of public policies and dominant ideas and actions in such a way that the potentiality of our agriculture can be envisioned and thus become a key piece in XXI Mexico development as it has been the case in other countries.

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<http://www.yale.edu/agrarianstudies/foodsovereignty/index.html>

A fundamentally contested concept, food sovereignty has — as a political project and campaign, an alternative, a social movement, and an analytical framework — barged into global agrarian discourse over the last two decades. Since then, it has inspired and mobilized diverse publics: workers, scholars and public intellectuals, farmers and peasant movements, NGOs and human rights activists in the North and global South. The term has become a challenging subject for social science research, and has been interpreted and reinterpreted in a variety of ways by various groups and individuals. Indeed, it is a concept that is broadly defined as the right of peoples to democratically control or determine the shape of their food system, and to produce sufficient and healthy food in culturally appropriate and ecologically sustainable ways in and near their territory. As such it spans issues such as food politics, agroecology, land reform, biofuels, genetically modified organisms (GMOs), urban gardening, the patenting of life forms, labor migration, the feeding of volatile cities, ecological sustainability, and subsistence rights.

Sponsored by the [Program in Agrarian Studies at Yale University](#) and the [Journal of Peasant Studies](#), and co-organized by [Food First, Initiatives in Critical Agrarian Studies \(ICAS\)](#) and the [International Institute of Social Studies \(ISS\)](#) in The Hague, as well as the Amsterdam-based [Transnational Institute \(TNI\)](#), the conference “Food Sovereignty: A Critical Dialogue” will be held at Yale University on September 14–15, 2013. The event will bring together leading scholars and political activists who are advocates of and sympathetic to the idea of food sovereignty, as well as those who are skeptical to the concept of food sovereignty to foster a critical and productive dialogue on the issue. The purpose of the meeting is to examine what food sovereignty might mean, how it might be variously construed, and what policies (e.g. of land use, commodity policy, and food subsidies) it implies. Moreover, such a dialogue aims at exploring whether the subject of food sovereignty has an “intellectual future” in critical agrarian studies and, if so, on what terms.

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