

From National Symbol to Economic Goods: A Brief History of Maize Consumption in Post-revolutionary Mexico

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Abstract

Maize has long been the main basic food in Mexico, especially among the peasants and poorer segments of urban dwellers. The Mexican Revolution, which partially was an upheaval of peasants and rural workers seeking land to exploit, and the successive governments which followed it, raised the peasants as the key actors in the post-Revolutionary society. The ideological importance of peasants and the needs of the urban workers for cheap food prompted the Revolutionary government to establish a series of official instruments to distribute the staple with considerable subsidies.

At the same time the post-revolutionary governments utilized the product as a symbol to create a form of national identity among Mexicans and to attempt to consolidate national integrity. But as the thirty years of “stabilized growth” came to an end in the 1970’s, maize became a heavy burden to the governments, which aimed to “economize” the Mexican society to gain more efficiency. This tendency eventually led to the end of agrarian reform (1992) and the signing of a free trade agreement with the U.S. and Canada (1994).

In the early 21st century the instability of the world grain market changed the scene. While the maize trade within the North America has been freed totally (2008), Mexican government renewed its support to its domestic production, this time not as an ideological tool but as a purely economic good. This paper tries to make clear: (a) the origin of the ideological use of maize, (b) political and economic effects of the state-subsidized supply system, and (c) the changes in the political use of maize in recent years.

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Introduction

Maize has long been the main basic food in Mexico, especially among the peasants and poorer segments of urban dwellers. The Mexican Revolution¹, which was partially an uprising of peasants and rural workers seeking their land to farm, and successive governments which followed affirmed the *campesinos* (peasants) as one of the key actors in the country's post-revolutionary society. Given the ideological importance of peasants and the needs of the urban workers for access to cheap food, post-revolutionary governments established a series of official institutions to distribute the staple at a considerably subsidized rate.²

On the other hand, the post-revolutionary governments utilized the product as a symbol of national identity among Mexicans and as an attempt to consolidate national integrity. But as the thirty years of "stabilized growth" came to an end in the 1970s, subsidizing maize became a heavy burden to the government, which aimed to "economize" Mexican society for the sake of more efficiency. This policy extended to the end of agrarian reform (1992) and to the free trade agreement (NAFTA) with the U.S. and Canada (1994).³

In recent years, instability in the world grain market changed the scene. While the maize trade within the North American continent had been totally liberalized when the transitional period was over in 2008, the Mexican government, now under a relatively conservative and entrepreneur-minded National Action Party (PAN), renewed its support for its domestic production, this time not as an ideological tool but as one of purely economic policy.

This paper tries to make clear the economic and social effects this change in government policy has had on the Mexican people. In doing so the paper considers (a) the political and economic effects of the state-subsidized supply system, (b) the origin of the ideological use of maize, and (c) the processes of change in the political use of maize in recent years.

1. On the Mexican Revolution, see such basic historical works as: Womack (1969); Womack (1986); Meyer, Jean (1986); Knight (1990); Ulloa (2000); Meyer, Lorenzo (2000a); Meyer, Lorenzo (2000b) among others.

2. On the agrarian and agricultural policies under the post-revolutionary regime, see Reyes Osorio et al. (1974).

3. There have been a number of excellent works on the new political tendencies carried out in 1990s. See, for example, Janvry, Gordillo and Sadoulet (1997); Cornelius and Myhre (1998) on the end of agrarian reform; Cameron and Tomlin (2000) on the process of NAFTA negotiations including that of agricultural trade.

1. Food Policy in the Post-revolutionary Mexico⁴

First, we can point out the “guaranteed price (*precio de garantía*)” policy as the most important food policy in post-revolutionary (and pre-1982) Mexico. Under this policy, the federal government purchased the 12 principal grains from the producers at officially fixed prices as the buyer of last resort. The guaranteed price of maize was introduced in 1953 and existed for 46 years until it was finally abolished in 1999.

This policy had different objectives and effects according to the ideological position of each administration (Solís Rosales 1990, 924). At first, the main objective was to support the peasants’ income to stimulate production and secure sufficient food supplies. This objective was also accomplished by preventing brokers from exploiting the peasants. On the other hand, when the federal government realized it needed to mitigate social tensions derived from inflation, especially in urban areas, the guaranteed price was set unchanged in nominal terms to keep the food price low in real terms for consumers.

To apply the guaranteed price effectively, the federal government established an independent entity, the National Basic Food Company (*Compañía Nacional de Subsistencias Populares: CONASUPO*). This company purchased 23.1% of the national maize production sold in 1979 (Fox 1993, 89) and monopolized all external trade of the basic grains. It also possessed a huge distributive and retail network of basic consumer goods, and its primary goal was “to appear to further social justice in the area of food procurement and distribution and thereby to legitimate the post-revolutionary state” (Fox 1993, 34).

In addition to this political support through official price controls, the federal government supplied irrigation systems, subsidized seeds and fertilizers, official loans at lower interest rates and several other incentives on behalf of the agricultural sector. But these policies basically favored large-scale land owners, who mainly produced commercial products in northern areas of the country.⁵ The peasants in southern Mexico who cultivated their small, rain-fed plots for self-sufficiency and who were basically an indigenous population, were practically alienated from these policies for modernizing agriculture.

4. Ochoa (2000) deals with this topic in broader economic and social contexts.

5. Northern and northwestern parts of Mexico were sparsely populated until the end of 19th century when mainly U.S. owned enterprises occupied and developed the lands to sell them to the investors. Endowed with vast and fertile lands and easy access to U.S. markets through railroads constructed (also) by U.S. capital, various kinds of commercial crops like cotton and tomatoes were produced in this area. Since the climate is arid, efficient agricultural production was impossible, and this fact prompted the post-revolutionary governments to provide massive irrigation facilities in the area. See Hewitt de Alcántara (1976).

This tendency changed in 1980 when the federal government, which at that time was experiencing a bonanza derived from higher oil prices, launched a new integrated rural development program called the Mexican Food System (Sistema Alimentario Mexicano: SAM). Since Mexico had been importing several millions of tons of basic grains yearly since the 1970s, the government decided to stimulate traditional agriculture to gain basic food production growth and achieve self-sufficiency in basic grains. The program also focused on the nutritional improvement of rural dwellers, counting on a variety of campaigns.⁶

2. Background of the Food Policies: Ideological Use of Maize in the Post-revolutionary Regime



Figure 1
Photo by Hiroyuki Tani

What was the background of these food policies? It has its beginnings with the Mexican Revolution, which was masterminded by Francisco I. Madero in 1910 and who expelled the dictator, Porfirio Díaz, in the following year.

This revolution was not a monolithic one in that it had, rather, a multifaceted character. One of its essential objectives was the realization of a democratic political system, as expressed in the Madero's slogan, "Effective Suffrage and No Re-election." But in reality, it was not merely an anti-dictatorship movement but a nationalist revolution against foreign economic powers claiming that all land, water, and underground natural resources were the "Mexican Nation's property," as stipulated in Article 27 of the Constitution of 1917.⁷ But along with these aspects, the Mexican Revolution was well symbolized by peasant upheavals, as represented by several notable murals by Mexican artists in the early revolutionary period (Figure 1).

6. For more details on SAM, see Luiselli (1982).

7. Full text of the original constitution and all the amendments implemented since then can be downloaded from the web page, "Leyes federales de México," provided by Mexican Chamber of Deputies.

The *campesino* rebellion, headed by Emiliano Zapata with its “Land and Liberty” banner, led to major agrarian reform also stipulated in Article 27 of the constitution. Agrarian reform not only appealed to the rural society as a fruit of the revolution, but also aroused nationalistic sentiments of the Mexican people in general, because it expropriated not a few *latifundios* (large estates) owned by foreign (mostly American) companies and landholders. It should also be added that at the moment the Revolution erupted, more than 70 percent of the Mexican population dwelled in rural areas (INEGI 1994, 42), a fact that gave considerable legitimacy to agrarian reform as a national project.

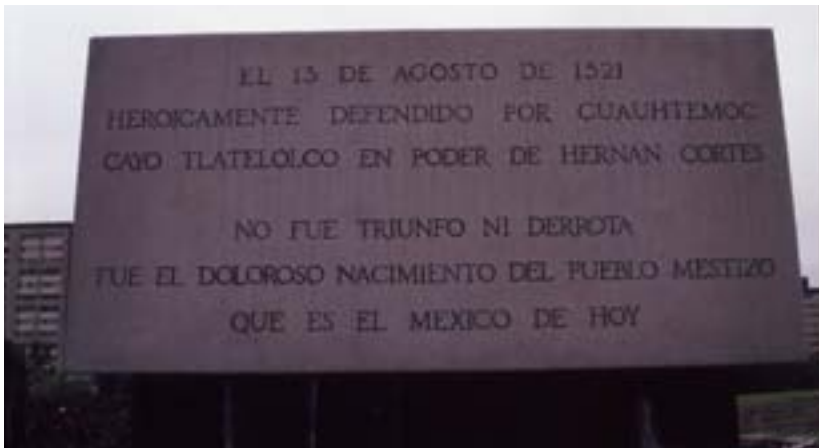


Figure 2
Photo by Hiroyuki Tani

Under the post-revolutionary regime, Mexican nationalism was based on an ideology which stated that “Mexicans are *mestizo* people.” Instead of the 19th-century form of liberalism, in which Europeanization of the country had been the objective, the post-revolutionary regime stipulated the *mestizo* people as the “national race” (Lomnitz, 2001, 52).

A historical monument constructed in the

Plaza of the Three Cultures (Plaza de las Tres Culturas),⁸ located in Tlatelolco, the northern part of Mexico City, eloquently tells the essence of this ideology (Figure 2). It says:

On 13th August, 1521,
heroically defended by Cuauhtémoc
Tlatelolco fell into the hands of Hernán Cortés.

It was neither triumph nor defeat.
It was the painful birth of the mestizo people,
that is today's Mexico.

In this manner, the contemporary Mexicans (*mestizos*) were conceived to form a “cosmic race,”⁹ a people full of potential, with the same inherited merits of all conventional races in the world (Europeans, Native Americans, Africans and Asians) and incarnated those merits into a body.

It is important to note that the *mestizos* were supposed to have European (or

8. This plaza is dedicated practically to the *mestizo* race. The “three cultures” refer to indigenous, Spanish, and *mestizo*, represented by pre-Columbian ruins, a colonial catholic church, and apartment houses for public laborers constructed under the post-revolutionary regime, respectively.

9. “Cosmic race (*raza cósmica*)” is a concept presented by a Mexican educator and statesman José Vasconcelos in his book with the same title published in 1925. For details see Vasconcelos (1958).

Spanish) fathers and indigenous mothers (Lomnitz, 2001, 53), as was, for the most part, the case. It might be natural that the image of the kitchen and of the daily meal should be strongly influenced by an indigenous culture. This implicit cultural interpretation put maize at the center as the means by which the post-revolutionary regime could consolidate the Mexican identity within its population. National integrity was also related to the fact that maize had long been the most important and basic food for the majority of Mexicans, as the catalogue of the Inaugural Exposition of National Museum of Popular Cultures¹⁰ makes clear: “Maize represents almost half of the total volume of foods consumed in Mexico every year and supplies the Mexican people almost half of the required calories. This share is much bigger for the population with lower income, especially the peasants” (Museo Nacional de Culturas Populares 1982, 7).

As we have seen, the importance of maize as a basic food justified governmental support of maize production and distribution, as described in the first section of this paper. It is interesting to point out that maize was also an important part of the social and ideological infrastructure in the building of a “Mexican Nation.” But for these political uses of maize, a budgetary endorsement was indispensable. Fortunately the federal government could carry out these supports thanks to Mexico’s long-sustained economic growth from the 1950s to the 1970s, a period that was formally recognized as “Stabilized growth,” and in journalistic terms was called the “Mexican miracle.” But when this long-lived economic expansion came to an end, food policy, as well, began to change and in turn the concept of maize in Mexico’s political and social contexts would also begin to change.

3. Food Policy Reforms under the Neo-liberal Governments

1982 Debt crisis and the neo-liberal reforms in the agricultural sector

In 1982 Mexico stopped its external debt repayment for a number of reasons, but this is not the focus of the paper. Here, it only needs to be pointed out that a period of austerity had become the rule in economic policies, and so-called “neo-liberal reforms” were being pursued vigorously.

In this process, agricultural and food policies also faced great changes. Article 27 of the constitution, which had inaugurated agrarian reform, was amended in 1992, after which the land redistribution policy was formally abolished. The justification of this policy change was based on the need to secure the property rights of landholders,

10. The museum was opened in 1982 at Coyoacán, the southern part of Mexico City. It is important to point out that its first exposition was dedicated to maize under the title, “El maíz: fundamento de la cultura popular mexicana (Maize: foundation of Mexican popular culture).”

who felt threatened by the possibility that the government might expropriate their lands. Under such circumstances, landholders would never invest needed capital in their land. Once the land titles were declared irrevocable, agricultural investment would be stimulated and productivity in the rural sector would rise.

It was also believed that problem of inefficiency was due to a lack of international competition in the agricultural sector (and the Mexican economy in general). Therefore the country began a radical trade liberalization process in July, 1985 and entered GATT in 1986. In 1990, Mexico initiated negotiations to sign a free trade agreement with the U.S. and Canada, which would be realized four years later as the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA). It is true that this treaty was intended to lift all of the barriers to free movement of goods and services between both sides of the borders. But also true was that the three member countries would be permitted to hold as exceptions, certain “sensitive” products under their own protection. Within this framework, Mexico was allowed to set a particularly long grace period for holding off the free imports of U.S. maize. In the meantime, the country kept a prohibitive tariff barrier against maize imports from the U.S., which covered a 14-year period, until it was totally freed on January 1, 2008. The quota for duty-free maize, however, was set and would be increased cumulatively during this grace period.

While the maize trade was to be liberalized, domestic maize distribution was privatized, and the guaranteed price policy mentioned earlier was lifted for the 10 products, with the exception of maize and beans (*frijoles*) in 1989. The official price for maize was raised in 1990 probably to mitigate the sentiments among Mexicans who were against the signing of the NAFTA agreement. This policy temporally stimulated maize production, especially within the modern agricultural sector in the northern part of Mexico. But finally, in 1999, the guaranteed price policy for maize was abolished and the National Basic Food Company was closed. Henceforth, the distribution of maize, both domestically and internationally, was to be run totally by private businesses.¹¹

New trends in policies to support maize production and distribution

The first of the new policies, entitled “Procampo,” was introduced in 1993 and was a direct income support program for grain growers. This program provides 1,160 pesos annually (about 85 U.S. dollars at the current exchange rate) per hectare directly to each producer. Since it was originally planned to be in effect until 2007,¹² which corresponded to the end of the grace period for maize imports, it can be surmised that

11. On this point, see Appendini (2001).

12. The program was later extended and is still in effect as of 2009.

this program was intended to be a complementary policy to NAFTA. The government urged the grain growers who received the subsidy to (a) raise productivity to the point that they could compete with foreign (i.e., the U.S.) grain producers, (b) prepare to switch to the production of crops which would give Mexico a comparative advantage, such as vegetables and/or fruits, or (c) prepare to leave the agricultural sector (Tani, 1995). This policy coincided with the recent world-wide tendency, whereby subsidies for the agricultural sector should be provided directly as part of the beneficiaries' income without distorting relative prices of the products.

Besides this general policy towards the production of grains, there are a few more policies of a specific nature, but before getting into that, we should point out that maize is not a single commodity, but a commodity of several varieties that should be discerned.¹³ The most important varieties in the context of this paper are “white maize” and “yellow maize.” White maize is the variety that the Mexican people have traditionally consumed as the basic element of their diet, for example, in the form of *tortillas*. Yellow maize is mainly for animal feed and industrial use, and more than 90% of maize production in the U.S. is this type. It might be important to point out that trade statistics in Mexico and the U.S. began to distinguish these two types of maize only after NAFTA had come into effect in 1994. That is to say, that the discussion the Mexicans had on whether maize importation should be liberalized or not while negotiating toward NAFTA was too simplistic.

The support policies for white maize have become limited to those concerning the distribution process. One element is the policy for transportation support, which is carried out by the agricultural ministry, and the other is for the modernization of the production of *tortillerías*, or small-scale *tortilla* workshops at the street corners, carried out by the Ministry of Economy. These supports are in place because while the domestic supply of white maize is sufficient at the national level, there can often be shortages locally, a problem that is partly due to the country's inland transportation and distribution system. As for the second policy, it must be pointed out that *tortilla* prices are politically and socially very sensitive because the price of white maize can fluctuate according to market forces. Consequently, *tortilla* shop owners can frequently suffer because of pressures between distributors and the final consumer. One important way to overcome this problem is for the shop owners to modernize their equipment to raise productivity and thereby absorb the cost.¹⁴

13. On various varieties of maize, see Baker (1978, 75-77), where “white maize” is classified as “flour corn.” The “yellow maize,” as called here, consists mainly of the variety called “dent corn” in the same book, though this fact is not made explicitly clear.

14. This policy could also correspond to the big rise in *tortilla* prices in 2006-2007.

*Support for yellow maize contract farming*¹⁵

The policy for yellow maize is more complex. Practically speaking, this is an import substitution policy, not precipitated by nationalism but this time by purely economic factors.

As mentioned above, a duty-free quota was stipulated for the 14-years grace period of NAFTA. The quota was initially set at 2.5 million tons for the first year (1994) and would be increased cumulatively at the rate of 3% per year. This means that the U.S. could export 2,813,772 tons of maize without paying any tariff to Mexico in 1998 (USDA). In reality, however, Mexico has been importing U.S. maize free of duties at a quantity far beyond this limit. This is because the sectors using yellow maize as their raw materials need cheap inputs to be able to compete with their U.S. counterparts.

For this purpose, the federal government set up an additional duty-free quota for those industrialists on condition that 25% of their inputs would be purchased from domestic producers. To secure the domestic supply, the Federal Income Law, which provided the tariff exemption, also stipulated that the Ministry of Agriculture mediate contracts between buyers and producers of yellow maize.

In this “Agriculture by Contract (Agricultura por contrato)” program, a “target income” is set for the producer, which functions practically as a “guaranteed price” for the producer. The producer and the buyer sign the contract before the producer sows the seeds. The seeds satisfying the needs of the buyers are, along with the proper technology package, supplied by the ministry. The contracted price of the maize is called “indifferent price.” This is set as the sum of an international price at the Chicago Board of Trade and the “Standard Basis at Consumer Zone,” which is comprised of the exchange rate and transportation and customs costs. We can say that this represents a “shadow price” of the maize, because it is equal to the price the buyer would pay if the maize were imported from the U.S. If the “indifferent price” is below the “target income” level, the federal government compensates the producer for the difference.

Also essential to note is why this import substitution process is carried out. The main aim of the NAFTA was to specialize in those products, processes and industries by which Mexico had (or could have had) a comparative advantage. In this context, maize production had to be abandoned though it might be needed during the quite

15. The description of this program is based on the Federal Income Law (Ley de Ingresos de la Federación), which can be accessed in the web page “Leyes federales de México” mentioned above. The regulatory rules of the Ministry of Agriculture downloadable from its web page.

long transitional period. But now, many elements—which were not considered when the NAFTA negotiations were in progress—have appeared. In those days, it was implicitly understood that the maize was for human consumption, but in fact it has been revealed to be more important in terms of industrial input. One reason was that as the Mexican economy started to recover and as average income grew, people began to consume more meat, which ultimately required the production of more yellow maize (instead of white maize for *tortillas*).

This tendency is not only confined to Mexico. As the world's oil prices soared, thus stimulating the production of bio-ethanol in the U.S., the price of maize also increased. This consequential instability of world commodity prices will likely lead to difficulties in importing U.S. maize,¹⁶ in which case Mexico will have to bid for U.S. maize at higher prices. This will in turn negatively impact the Mexican people, who consume maize directly as a food product, as well as Mexican industries that need cheap U.S. maize as the basic ingredients for other products. But if countries other than Mexico bid it at the prices even higher, this will prohibit Mexico from importing the maize. We can now conclude that the import substitution process observed in recent years is completely different from those of the pre-1982 era and has been induced by purely economic reasons.

Concluding Remarks: Maize as a “Politically Neutral” Plant

As we have seen, maize, once proclaimed a national symbol, has undergone a great change in its political meanings. It had originally been an important political resource for the Mexican post-revolutionary governments in gaining its people's confidence and for establishing credibility for the regime's legitimacy. It was necessary for the government to support maize production, distribution and consumption because Mexico was the cradle of maize, and the Mexicans themselves were conceived to be “made from maize.” But these supports could not be continued after the external debt crisis had broken out in 1982, which was followed by the “lost decade.” Under these new circumstances, the Mexican government could no longer afford the costly policies. Even the decision makers were no longer eager to continue the supports, because, for them maize was little more than an item of trade. Now maize has turned out to be a “politically neutral” plant.¹⁷

There is an interesting cultural representation of maize in the recently remodeled National Anthropology Museum in Mexico City. Figure 3 shows a panel in the room dedicated to the dawn of civilization in the region that is now Mexico.

16. On bio-ethanol and maize production in Mexico, see also Aguilar Gómez (2008).

17. It is also important to point out that there have been several movements against this new economic conception of maize among researchers and (especially left-wing) politicians. See Esteva and Marielle (2003).



Referring to the origins of maize, it says, “Maize is not the oldest domesticated plant, nor is Mexico the only center of its domestication in America.” In short, maize is no longer the source of Mexico’s “national pride.”

This statement is surely scientifically prudent and correct. But it is politically significant that maize is now represented in these terms in an official space such as a national museum. Aside from the fact that maize imports from the U.S. have greatly increased, this change in the way the Mexican government conceives maize might be one of the single largest effects of NAFTA on this grain, which was once consecrated as Mexico’s national symbol.

Figure 3
Photo by Hiroyuki Tani

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