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## The social life of the tortilla: Food, cultural politics, and contested commodification \*

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**Abstract.** Resurgent interest in commodities is linked to recent attempts to overcome the constraints posed by the binaries of economy/culture and production/consumption. Commodities and commodification represent a contentious convergence of economic, social, cultural, political, and moral concerns. This essay develops a conceptual framework for understanding this interconnectedness by examining the relationship between commodities and our discourse, practices, and assumptions about food. We argue that the movement of a food artifact between local/global and global/local contexts is mediated by dynamics of power and resistance that represent contests of meaning regarding the criteria of that artifact's exchangeability. We apply this framework to the case of the tortilla, tracing its social life through an historical account of its transformation from the staple food of the Mayan and Aztec people to its introduction as a fast food component of the diets of 21st century Americans. This example demonstrates that food provides a powerful lens through which to trace and illustrate the interconnectedness between material and symbolic exchanges around the world that are commonly associated with globalization.

**Key words:** Commodification, Culture, Globalization, Mexico, Tortilla

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### Introduction

Human food practices set us apart from all other animals. Cultural differences in the way we produce, prepare, and eat our food can also set us apart from one another. We do not eat merely to gain nutrients. We eat to experience tastes – combining meats, fruits, vegetables, and seasonings in an endless variety of complex chemical interactions that produce different smells and flavor sensations. We also eat for reasons other than taste. Meat and potatoes, apple pie, turkey, grits, tacos, beans and rice, low fat yogurt, veggie-burgers, a Big Mac and fries to go; these foods all carry a symbolic load far heavier than simple nutrition or taste preferences can capture. Foods have meaning for us. They signify lifestyle, celebration and ritual,

nutritional concerns, and personal, ethnic, regional, and national identities. Ethnic foods in particular are increasingly conspicuous as symbolic transnational cuisine experiences that both constitute and convey broader processes of economic and cultural globalization. What does it mean to walk into a restaurant and order Cajun spiced seafood in a red chili tortilla-wrap or Thai chicken in a ginger tortilla? Of what cuisine are we partaking and why? Are we eating Thai, Cajun, Latin American, Convenience, or some emerging global food *mélange*?

Literature in the political economy of agriculture has placed the production and consumption of food at the center of debates surrounding globalization and has highlighted the myriad ways in which the food we eat connects us with peoples from all parts of the world (McMichael, 1991; Friedmann, 1999; Bonanno et al., 1994). Scholars in this tradition tend to define globalization primarily in terms of the extension of the power of neoliberal economic managers and market-

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centered governance into ever greater spatial, social, and political arenas. Their approach compares international agro-food regimes historically, highlighting different commodity systems and their relationship to national and international food markets in an attempt to understand trends in global governance through the lens of the political economy of food. In this context, Phillip McMichael has proposed that the power of food “lies in its material *and* symbolic functions of linking nature, human survival, health, culture and livelihood” (2000: 21, emphasis added). The material function of food has been extensively analyzed, but more rigorous attempts are needed to conceptualize the relationship between food’s material and symbolic characteristics in order to more fully understand the social consequences of a rapidly changing global food system (Fonte, 1991; Mintz, 1995).

Our intention here is to construct a narrative bridge between political-economic and cultural/symbolic discourses regarding globalization and food. We recognize the important political, economic, and institutional forces of international trade that structure connections between different localities. But we want to focus discussion on the interconnectedness apparent in the movement of material and discursive cultural products around the world. An orientation toward these cultural dimensions emphasizes the fact that it is increasingly difficult to “disentangle symbolic exchanges from actual material exchanges and processes” (Lin, 1998: 315). We argue that the movement of a food artifact between local/global and global/local contexts is mediated by dynamics of power and resistance that represent contests of meaning regarding the criteria of that artifact’s exchangeability. In confronting the political culture of exchange at this level, we are able to bring a finer degree of analysis to the question of how our everyday food practices connect us to broader market-oriented assumptions about living in society.

In the following section, we develop a conceptual framework for understanding the interconnectedness between material and symbolic exchanges by examining the relationship between commodities and our cultural practices and assumptions about food. We then apply this discussion to the case of the tortilla, tracing its social life through an historical account of its transformation from the staple food of the Mayan and Aztec people to its introduction as a fast food component of the diets of 21st century Americans and Europeans.

## Revisiting commodification

### *Being and meaning*

The intellectual context of resurgent interest in commodities is linked to recent attempts to overcome the constraints posed by the long-standing binaries of economy/culture and production/consumption. The rich literature in this area is complex and many faceted. The commodity itself and the process of commodification represent a perplexing and contentious conceptual nexus of economic, social, cultural, political, and moral concerns. Here we trace some of these debates but focus on conceptualizing the relationship between commodities and what Margaret Radin (1996) refers to as “commodification as worldview.” To do this requires giving special attention to the cultural politics of exchangeability and particularly to the “indicia of commodification” that undergird this framework for knowing the world.

Since Marx, the commodity has been considered the economic “cell form” of capitalism (see Watts, 1999) and his ideas about “commodity fetishism” have been a reoccurring subject of analysis for critical social scientists including sociologists dealing with food and agriculture (see Allen and Kovach, 2000; Goodman and DuPuis, 2002; Barndt, 1997). For Marx, commodity fetishism involved the projection of power and action onto commodities in a way that reflects but disguises social relations. The “true” social relations between people are disguised as relationships between commodities that appear to be governed by abstract market forces. Georg Lukács further developed Marx’s ideas regarding commodity fetishism and in doing so found commodification to be “the central, structural problem of capitalist society in all its aspects” (cited in Radin, 1996: 81). By this, Lukács meant that capitalism expresses a kind of “universal commodification” or oversimplified archetype that prescribes a one dimensional view of value in which all things that people desire or value are subject in principle to free market exchange. For Lukács and many of his intellectual descendants, this framework of commodification interpenetrates both discourse and practice in capitalist societies. In other words, in capitalist societies commodification in discourse and practice are seen as inseparable and all pervasive. “They underwrite not only an economy of industrial capitalism but also a philosophy of atomistic individualism and a culture of consumerism” (Radin, 1996: 83). In this view, commodification brings about a debasement of human life.

Where Lukács struggled with the all-pervasiveness of commodification in capitalism, more recent work has begun to explore the implications of highlighting

the social and cultural construction of this economic form. In this vein, Appadurai (1986) argues that an entity becomes a commodity only in certain socially and culturally defined situations. He defines a “commodity situation” in the social life of any such “thing” as “the situation in which its exchangeability (past, present, or future) for some other thing is its socially relevant feature” (1986: 13). Several implications follow from this definition, one of which is that things can move into and out of the commodity state. For example, a food artifact like corn, when it is grown under a corporate contract, ground into flour in a commercial processing plant, and manufactured into a tortilla solely for sale in a wholesale, retail, or fast food outlet, exists in the commodity state for most of its “social life.” On the other hand, if an individual buys the corn flour, makes it into a tortilla, and prepares it for eating in a household or community food event, the flour is removed from the “commodity phase” of its social life at the time it is purchased. Its exchangeability in the household or community is defined by a different set of understandings about the role of that particular thing and under what circumstances it may be exchanged. Most of us would not expect dinner guests, partners, or other (inter)dependents to pay money for food in the context of the home or a community potluck.

This allows us to begin to speak of cultural frameworks and social contexts that define the exchangeability of things. A central thrust of Appadurai’s observations is that any attempt to understand the commodity situation must address the politics surrounding commodification, that is, the social relations, assumptions, and struggles related to meaning and power that create a situation in which a thing is or is not treated as a commodity. He uses the term “commodity candidacy” to refer to the “standards and criteria (symbolic, classificatory, and moral) that define the exchangeability of things in any particular social or historical context” (Appadurai, 1986: 14). These standards and criteria express a minimal agreement bridging two or more contradictory frameworks and not a complete sharing of cultural assumptions. Therefore, the term candidacy connotes the political struggle that surrounds the establishment of these criteria and standards of exchangeability.

Appadurai argues that in order to understand the link between political contests surrounding the commodity candidacy of a thing and its literal treatment as a commodity, we must pay attention to the context of exchange. He uses the term “commodity context” to refer to the variety of “social arenas, within and between cultural units, which help link the commodity candidacy of a thing to the commodity phase of its career” (Appadurai, 1986: 15). For example, struc-

tural adjustment policies or international trade agreements like NAFTA are increasingly eroding the role of the nation-state as an intermediary between powerful actors like transnational corporations and actors in local, regional, and national contexts. Corn exchanged in the context of NAFTA and maize exchanged in the context of Mexico’s now defunct *ejido* system exist in different commodity contexts. While both situations might involve the exchange of money for corn/maize, the NAFTA context links a different set of discursive criteria to the commodity phase of corn’s social life and has different socioeconomic and politico-cultural consequences. In this manner, contexts like the *ejido* system or NAFTA that exist “within and across societies, provide the link between the social environment of the commodity and its temporal and symbolic state” (Appadurai, 1986: 15).

#### *Meaning and power*

One of the most comprehensive attempts to capture this relationship between the social environment of a thing and the temporal and symbolic dimensions of its commodification is provided by anthropologist Sidney Mintz in his work *Sweetness and Power* (1985). In his account of the production and consumption of sugar, Mintz argues that within complex societies “webs of signification” link us to history and social pasts. This does not mean that the meanings we associate with things like a particular food item come to us as pre-constituted givens. Rather, these meanings are part of a cultural history that is learned, practiced, and constructed. Harriet Friedmann (1999) has described how patterns of food practices change over time in response to political and economic changes at regional, national, and international levels. She demonstrates how the “traditions” that we associate with the way we grow, process, distribute, prepare, and eat our food were in large measure constructed through the larger social processes of colonialism, development, and globalization.

Mintz argues that the process of constructing these “traditions” involves a politics of meaning and emphasizes that the webs of signification that we associate with particular food practices are not homogenous. Across the various divisions and layers that mark human society, learned meanings will differ from one group to another. Mintz proposes that it ought to be possible to interpret the webs of signification associated with a particular “thing” in terms of group differences. He suggests that the generation and transmission of meaning from one group to another is “perhaps the point where meaning and power touch most clearly” (1986: 158). In other words, power and meaning are always connected, “power is . . . never

external to signification” (Mintz, 1995: 12). How one meaning might proliferate over and against another meaning, and how this shift might be connected with the advent of literal changes in human interaction and understanding, are, therefore, issues that need investigation.

### *Meaning and markets*

Typically, research concerned with commodified food and agricultural products assumes an exchange of things for money in the social context of markets; a seller delivers goods to a buyer and a buyer delivers money to a seller. In this literal market, agricultural commodities are artifacts produced for sale and the contacts between buyers and sellers constitute the markets themselves. That food is often treated as a market commodity in this literal sense is a matter of common sense knowledge grounded in the everyday experience of shopping at the supermarket, grocery store, or even the local farmers’ market (see Hinrichs, 2000).

For some neoliberal economists, the market is the optimal form of social organization and should govern as much of social life as possible. Margaret Radin (1996) refers to this perspective as “commodification as worldview.” She argues that as an initial step towards understanding commodification, it is important to distinguish the literal market described above (the exchange of things in the world for money) from the market as metaphor. As a metaphor, the market becomes a discursive structure for understanding not only economic but also social interactions. This metaphorical market is typified in the work of such thinkers as Nobel prize-winning economist Gary Becker (1991), who approaches social interactions that do not involve actual exchanges of money, like family, marriage, love, and birth, as if they did involve handing over money for things (Radin, 1996: 1).

Radin argues that literal commodification and commodification in discourse are loosely connected in the same way that action in general and discourse in general are interdependent, but that they need not, and often are not coextensive in practice. In this sense, commodification is often contested or incomplete. For Radin, “contested commodification” can refer to participant aspects, the inside meanings people ascribe to an interaction, or to social aspects, the social policy choices and outside meanings that reflect a group’s orientation towards a thing destined for exchange

The participant aspect of incomplete commodification draws attention to the meaning of an interaction for those who engage in it. The social aspect draws attention to the way in which society as a

whole recognizes that things have nonmonetizable participant significance. (Radin, 1996: 107)

For example, when we purchase fair trade coffee, we participate in its literal commodification but we do so, at least in part, with a concern for protecting the complex of social, economic, and cultural relationships of the human families and communities who produce that coffee. The fair trade label relies upon the assumption that participants incompletely commodify coffee. In other words, the label assumes that persons will make decisions based on non-market values. At the same time, from a social policy perspective, fair trade coffee is subjected to the same deregulated markets as any other coffee. In these markets, we can imagine a situation in which price concerns dominate the transaction and consequently money as a measure of value becomes the basis for decisions and we move toward a stronger sense of commodification.

As this example suggests, defining the degree to which commodification is incomplete turns out to be a difficult task because one could focus on many aspects of contestation. For this reason, Radin and others (see Hinrichs, 2000) argue that it is often most helpful to conceptualize commodification as a continuum or interconnected set of continua that could range from participant and social aspects to the level of coherence between literal market action and the pervasiveness in society of “commodification as worldview.” For example, within literal markets, a continuum between regulated and laissez faire markets could be constructed where regulated markets represent a form of incomplete commodification and laissez faire markets represent a more complete commodification. However, even laissez-faire markets can demonstrate a variable degree of commodification. If only a delimited number of things are exchanged in laissez-faire markets, we move toward incomplete commodification, but if everything that people value is bought and sold, then we move toward a more complete sense of commodification. At the level of market rhetoric, similar continua could be constructed. For example, a continuum of conceptual pervasiveness in society might argue that if only a few neoclassical economists subscribe to the market metaphor, we lean towards incomplete commodification, but if market rhetoric is pervasive in politics, advertising, the news media, and ordinary language, we move toward complete commodification (Radin, 1996: 116–117).

### *Four indicia of commodification*

Other continua could be constructed and for Radin an important analytical structure for understanding commodification in rhetoric involves the degree of

adherence to a set of four assumptions about exchange that she calls “indicia of commodification”: (1) objectification, (2) fungibility, (3) commensurability, and (4) money equivalence. Objectification refers to the practice of ascribing to some aspect of material or social reality the status of a thing that can be manipulated at the will of persons. It marks an important initial separation of that aspect of human experience from the boundaries of the self or social world. Fungibility generally presupposes objectification. It means that any two objects destined for exchange are fully interchangeable with no loss of value to the holder. If we take the food pyramid as an example, we could imagine a situation in which a tortilla could be viewed as fungible with a slice of bread based on nutritive content. In this context, the tortilla and the slice of bread are interchangeable with each other but are not necessarily interchangeable with other objects, such as a spoon.

Commensurability goes a step further than fungibility and is related to measurement and the nature of value. It expresses an understanding of value that is unitary and means that the worth of some thing can be ordered as a function of one continuous variable, or can be linearly ranked. Commensurability suggests that things like tortillas, bread, spoons, labor, household meals, and eating pleasures could be subjected to a common metric, or at least that these things could be arrayed in order and compared on one continuous curve from less to more valuable. Money equivalence then refers to situations in which the continuous variable used for this comparative ranking is money and suggests the presence of the other indicia of commodification (Radin, 1996: 118). Once money equivalence has been realized in conception or in action, the implication is that those aspects of life that we value can be assigned a price at which they can be bought or sold.

In Radin’s view, “something important to humanity is lost if market rhetoric becomes (or is considered to be) the sole rhetoric of human affairs” (1996: 122). She is concerned with the implications of a worldview that would consider all elements of social life to be subject to objectification, fungibility, commensurability, and ultimately a dollar value or price. In this sense, the “indicia of commodification” concern not only the effects of consuming commodified goods and services, but also the effects on personhood, social institutions, and places of being commodified. In particular, the commodification of human attributes such as labor, intellect, creativity, and body parts has raised a recurring

... moral concern in Western thought and is likely to remain a troubling realm for exchange because the difference between persons and things is parti-

cularly difficult to define, defying all attempts at drawing a simple line where there is a natural continuum. (Kopytoff, 1986: 69)

This moral concern is further complicated if we start from the premise that persons have certain characteristics and capabilities that make it possible for them to develop into fully functioning human beings able to live a good life. Martha C. Nussbaum (1992), for example, in her “theory of the good” outlines a provisional list of what these characteristics and capabilities might be. Her list includes the possibilities and vulnerabilities of the human body, being able to have good health, adequate nourishment, adequate shelter, and opportunities for sexual satisfaction. It also includes the human characteristic of affiliations with other human beings and the capabilities of being able to live for and with others, to recognize and show concern for others, and to engage in various forms of familial and social interaction (Nussbaum, 1992: 216–223). Significantly, items valuable to personhood and the good life that could appear on such a list cannot be traded off against one another. For example, having an over abundance of food does not make up for a lack of caring human affiliations in one’s life. Most of us probably have a similar understanding of our experience in the world and rely on an ethical premise about what is important for leading a good life that implies a sense of pluralism in the nature of value, which is strongly opposed to the market metaphor. In other words, we recognize that there are aspects of our life that are valuable in and of themselves and cannot be subjected to a single metric of value that allows them to be priced and exchanged with each other. As Nussbaum argues, “a life that lacks any of these, no matter what else it has, will be lacking in humanness” (1992: 222).

#### *The boundaries of the sacred*

If commodification as worldview is considered in terms of Radin’s “indicia of commodification,” then the realization of money equivalency in action and rhetoric can be understood metaphorically as the crossing of a threshold or boundary. Whether or not this crossing is considered a transgression depends upon our cultural understandings of what aspects of our humanness we consider inviolable or sacred. The sacred, as we wish to use it here, refers to the human perception that certain aspects of our lived experience should be set apart and protected from the process of commodification. To commodify them would violate or demean not some mystical property of an objectified “thing,” but our own lives and our understandings of the role of that thing in our experience of being human. While different cultures will place different arenas of

life into the sacred category, in all societies the designation establishes important moral boundaries that govern appropriate behavior relative to that aspect of our lived experience.

Authors writing from a number of perspectives have explored how the development of capitalism and commodity culture have widened the scope of the market metaphor while simultaneously constricting the field of influence of the sacred. For Durkheim (2001), in all “primitive societies” the sacred existed in dialectical tension with the profane, but with the advance of modernity its influence began to decrease. Weber associated the iron cage of an enveloping rationality with the secular desacralisation or “disenchantment” of the world (Weber, 1958: 155; see also Sayer, 1991: 148–150). Other authors have noted how science, the source of much of capitalism’s productive capacity, has progressively reconstructed our understanding of the sacred. Carolyn Merchant (1990), for example, examines the role of the inanimate machine in displacing the living organism as root metaphor binding together self, society, and the cosmos. And Lawrence Busch (2000) sees in scientism, statism, and marketism the drive to find a singular external force to ensure social order – a doomed endeavor that eventually results in the “eclipse of morality.”

#### *Food, the sacred and commodification*

By associating commodification with the metaphorical crossing of a threshold or sacred boundary, the practicalities of food production and consumption can be explored in a new light. Food itself is a powerful metaphor that blurs the boundaries between “things” and persons, linking nature, human survival, health, culture and livelihood, as McMichael (2000) has suggested. In this capacity, it often takes on sacred qualities and provides a practical and symbolic focal point around which people assert modes of valuing that contrast with and sometimes actively contest the market metaphor.

To understand how a particular food, like the tortilla, can be meaningful in this way requires an historical exploration of that food’s social life and attention to the changing contexts and political struggles through which different groups of people construct a knowledge of food, the sacred, and each other. In the following narrative, we seek to contextualize the tortilla in this way through an historical account of its movement from pre-colonial Mesoamerican cultures into the diets of 21st century American culture.

#### **The social life of the tortilla**

In narrating the social life of the tortilla, we trace its story through four “epochs”: the pre-colonial era, the colonial era, the development and nation building era, and the globalization era. These epochs are heuristic devices that reflect broad historical periods or regimes often discussed in the political economy of food and agriculture. We accept a certain veracity in the notion that these epochs mark a progressive intensification of the boundary politics between commodified and sacred understandings of the tortilla. However, this should not imply that a pure, authentic culture of the tortilla exists, waiting to be discovered in a particular place or time. As Cook and Crang (1996) point out, many of the foods we view as basic or traditional to a particular place are likely to have been constructed themselves through cultural flows of people and things across space and time. At the same time, “To understand, for example, how compliance or resistance to commoditization is achieved . . . [we need] to examine the ways in which actors’ identities [both human and material] are constructed at a variety of different points – historical as well as spatial” (Verschoor, 1992: 178). Our use of epochs is intended to provide a framework for exploring the ways in which sacred and commodified understandings of the tortilla were negotiated, contested, and constructed in different times and places. Particularly in a global context, foods like the tortilla come to embody the tensions of this cultural politics and following their history allows us to more fully consider what Arce and Marsden (1993) have described as the “unequal exchange of values internationally.” In this sense, the critique of fetishism is still useful, not necessarily because it unmasks the “true” social relations that commodities represent, but because it requires us to take seriously our material and moral connections to a multitude of cultural others.

#### *Epoch 1: The pre-colonial era*

The beginning of the tortilla is difficult to date precisely, but the social life of the tortilla is intimately woven into the Mesoamerican culture of maize and we can trace some of its story through the story of maize. Like rice and wheat in other regions of the world, maize is a thoroughly cultural artifact and its domestication and improvement is strongly correlated with the development of cultural complexity and the rise of the stratified civilizations of pre-colonial Mesoamerica. Biological clues to the origin of maize cultivation remain controversial, but the material significance of maize in the history of Central and South American societies is symbolized in the extent to which it permeates the oral traditions, mythologies, and folklore

of a temporally and spatially diverse assortment of peoples including the Maya and Aztec. These mythologies, folktales, and legends offer a powerful tool for relating meanings from one generation to the next. They often tell a story of creation, explain the relationship between a people and their gods, or explain the relationship between a people and their rulers.

Despite the uncertainty surrounding its origins, the practice of making tortillas remains largely unchanged in some rural areas of Mexico and we can interpret some of its meanings for pre-colonial peoples by examining this everyday practice of production. The tortilla begins with kernels of maize typically grown and harvested by men. However, knowledge of tortilla making is typically women's knowledge. The harvested maize kernels are boiled and soaked in an alkali bath that removes the hard skins of the kernels. While still wet, the engorged kernels (*nixtamal*) are placed on a three legged *metate* or grinding stone and, working on her knees, the cook grinds the kernels with a pestle to form a dough called *masa* in Spanish. The woman then takes pieces of the dough and shapes them by hand into flat disks. A clay *comal* or griddle has already been placed on the three stones encircling the cooking fire and when it is hot enough that water bounces on its surface the disks are cooked for twenty to thirty seconds on each side producing a flat, round, chewy tortilla.

For Mesoamericans, these everyday practices were linked in a variety of ways to the community, nature, the cosmos, and the gods. In the words of Cruz, "The *comal* is the hearth and the making of tortillas [is] the artery pumping life into the courtship between sacred and profane" (Cruz, 2000: 3). We can trace this courtship symbolically through the creation myth related in the *Popol Vuh*, a sacred text of the Mayan peoples. According to this text, in the beginning the creator gods raised the land above the waters, called forth the trees and vegetation, and set the sky as a mirror image to the earth. In the center of the earth, the gods placed the "three hearthstones of creation," which are reflected in the sky in the three stars that are located in the constellation known in the West as Orion. These three stars symbolize the three hearthstones of the typical kitchen fireplace and "even today, every time a Mayan housewife cooks a tortilla on her *comal* she is linked to the twin hearths of creation, one in the earth's navel and the other in a constellation of stars" (Fussell, 1999).

The story continues, for even in this first beginning, the idea of human beings was present in the thoughts of the gods, but it took the gods four attempts to make the perfect human being. Integral to this story of successive creations is the belief that not only were human beings improved with each successive creation, but so

were the plants and foods of the world. After creating the sky-earth, the Creator gods made humans first out of mud and then out of wood. However, both of these peoples were not perfect. They were ill formed, had no blood or flesh, and "lacked anything fit to eat" (Girard, 1948). Therefore, the gods destroyed them.

And so, the divine council reconvened to form a new humanity. Through a series of mythic events, they came upon the maize plant and knew that it was good. They said of the maize, we shall "consecrate the nutriment which will sustain our civilized progeny, making their existence on the face of the earth divine" (Girard, 1948) and when the maize was ripe the gods worked it into dough and mixed it with their own blood to fashion humans – literally, "maize people." In Mayan mythology, the coming of deity into the soul and body "is naturally related only after the maize becomes the material employed to mold the beings of the Fourth creation" (Girard, 1948). Thus, maize people were the best possible creatures, and maize the best possible food. Each time a woman bends over her *metate* to work the wet maize kernels into dough and shape the dough into tortillas, she reenacts the initial creative moment. To this day in the Aztec tongue Nahuatl, the dough she molds is called *toneuhcayotl*, which means "our flesh" (Salvador, 1997). Maize and the people who consume it are joined in one continuum of divine creation.

Where the everyday practice of tortilla making continues, a familiar rhythm revolves around the hearth that links the cook outward from the meal to the family to the social and economic relations that define the community and its place in the world, for the hearth fire is also the site of *comida*. As Gustavo Esteva (1994: 5) describes it,

That fire and [the cook] are the center of the conversation, and in fact the very center of family life, and family life is the center of the community. The whole community's life is in fact organized around such fires, the center of kitchens, the source of *comida*.

Here food is woven into an understanding of what it means to be part of a human community. To objectify the food, to separate it from the fire, the familial conversation or community life, would, for this particular group, disrupt the context within which they experience their humanness. Esteva (1994: 6) further reinforces this understanding by stressing that *comida* is, in fact,

... food-in-context [and] we need to be fully aware that this context cannot be defined by the "local color" of the restaurant, the quality of the food itself, or the genius of the cook. The context is *necessarily*



the social context, the whole human world which *comida* embeds, the very heart and soul of *comida*.

This sense of *comida* as food in social context is reflected in one telling of the origins of the tortilla itself. Jenaro Castañeda (1999) relates the story told in her home of the first tortilla. By this account, an unmarried Mayan king concerned for the welfare of his people issued a proclamation that the Mayan maiden who could come up with the best idea to improve the Mayan people would be his bride. A young Mayan peasant living in the countryside was very much in love with the king but she was also very poor and felt that she had no chance in the contest. The Mayan god of food visited her in her sleep and taught her how to make the tortilla. With the tortilla, she won the heart of her king and her people.

If we consider the history of Mexico from the perspective of the tortilla, much of the story of the country can be considered as a negotiation of the terms and meanings of this initial exchange between the Mayan peasant and her ruler. As Castañeda's tale suggests, the tortilla is the providence of women whose role at the hearth is that of a gatekeeper to the inside meanings of culture, the family, the home, and the meal. The tortilla was enclosed within the boundaries of these inside meanings, which extended out to embrace the community, nature, and the cosmos. Throughout Mexico's history, neither the kings nor the peasants could ignore issues related to the production, distribution, and consumption of tortillas. In this capacity, the social history of the tortilla can act as guide to outside meanings, the meanings associated with the politics of cultural and economic exchange that have helped to constitute the Mexican experience.

### *Epoch 2: Colonial era*

Those are the beginnings of the social life of the tortilla. The next stage begins with Spanish conquest and carries over into the period following Mexican independence and preceding the Mexican Revolution. Two dynamics, one external to the New World and one domestic to it, mark this period. Maize was transported on European vessels across the Atlantic and around the world. It was adopted into the local subsistence food cultures of peasant communities in Africa, Europe, and Asia and became incorporated into the political economy of colonialism. Wherever maize went it was given new names. In England, maize was translated into "corn," which was originally a generic term that signified grains of all kinds including grains of salt as in "corned beef" (Fussell, 1999: 2). In part, this reflected maize's lack of social history in the West, but it also spoke to an attitude of

fungibility and foreshadowed the attitude of commensurability with which Europeans would approach this newly discovered grain.

The tortilla did not accompany maize on this initial exodus from the "New World," and within colonized Mesoamerica, where it remained intrinsically linked to maize, a tension emerged between maize culture and wheat culture that helped define the confrontation between the Spanish and Mesoamerican peoples. In part, this confrontation represented a struggle over the "commodity candidacy" of maize itself, but it also signified a struggle over the "commodity candidacy" of the Mesoamerican people's labor and an attempt to redefine their political consciousness.

The Spaniards considered maize to be an inferior grain that produced coarse foodstuffs and tried to "eradicate the existing culture of [maize]" (Pilcher, 1998: 3). The ensuing conflict initiated the first stirrings of what Pilcher refers to as the "tortilla discourse" in which missionaries, grocers, chefs, social workers, agronomists, and politicians were enlisted in an attack on the tortilla, promoting its replacement by leavened wheat bread. This "tortilla discourse" continued after Mexican independence and was reinvigorated in the later part of the 19th century by the newly emerging science of nutrition, which stressed the fungibility of wheat for maize in terms of bodily nourishment alone, thereby marginalizing those less fungible qualities that linked the people of maize to their native plant. Going even further, Senator Francisco Bulnes explained the underdevelopment of Mexican society by dividing humanity into three races: the race of maize, rice, and wheat. By this account, and in contrast to the Mayan and Aztec mythology, the race of wheat was the best race (Pilcher, 1998). A common metric, established through scientific analysis of the nutritional value of staple grains, provided the gaze of commensurability through which Mr. Bulnes proposed to measure the "races" against each other.

The political ramifications of this campaign become evident during the first half of the 20th century. The scientific explanation of a natural superiority of the race of wheat appealed to the ruling elites who were frustrated by the apparent refusal of the *campesinos* to "participate in either the market economy or the national community" (Pilcher, 1998: 77). Administrators felt that wheat could help give the *campesinos* a new moral sense of duty to work and to the nation that reflected Western practices. They translated these polemics into public policies and educational programs, and these "thin simplifications" of formulaic state-led attempts to better the human condition brought further pressure to bear upon the practical knowledge that connected *campesinos* and maize (Scott, 1998).

Wheat production increased substantially under the post-revolution governments but mostly on large private farms dedicated to commodity production. Wheat also made some inroads into maize culture but in the “creolized” form of wheat flour tortillas, which were concentrated in north and central Mexico where Spanish influence was greatest. In southern Mexico, wheat flour tortillas are still sometimes referred to as “Arab bread,” an association that may also have an historical link to Spanish Turk relations. Nonetheless, for the most part, the staple grains, maize and wheat, remained mutually exclusive and the bread-tortilla distinction demarcated a pervasive cultural and socioeconomic boundary in which bread fed a wealthy Creole society and the tortilla fed poor, indigenous communities.

### *Epoch 3: Development and nation building era*

The twentieth century ushered in a new context in the social life of the tortilla. This was a period of nation building and development and the tortilla again played an important role. Developments in the industrialization of tortilla production combined with the post-revolution creation of the *ejido* system culminated in a package of policies and institutions that formed the basis of what has been described as the “Tortilla Welfare” state (Jenkins, 1998). These processes provided an infrastructure centered on maize and the tortilla that insured the welfare of the people, integrated the *campesinos* into a protected domestic market, and created a context in which an emerging middle class re-appropriated the tortilla as a symbol of national identity.

By the time of the Mexican revolutions, tortilla production had begun a slow process of industrialization that began with wet corn milling and was followed in 1905 by the tortilla hand press, but it was not until the 1960s that an effective mass produced cooking machine became marketable (Pilcher, 1998). These developments became important components in the package of state initiatives that moved the Mexican food system toward ever-greater self-sufficiency. The *ejido* provided the economic basis for self-governing communities of indigenous peoples whose maize cultivation and cultural foods were protected from pressures to grow export crops. It was buttressed by a package of state policies that offered price supports and marketing assistance to farmers and subsidized the price of tortillas for urban wage earners. This protection created a context in which a vast network of small *masa* mills and tortillerías supplied fresh tortillas to urban neighborhoods and rural communities. In addition, the 1970s saw the final stages of this process of integration with the introduction of a collection

of welfare programs like CONASUPO, DINSA, and DIF, all of which distributed basic food commodities, including prominently the tortilla, to the poor.

*Campesinos* did not accept these changes without skepticism, but women did recognize the potential advantages offered by corn mills and tortilla presses in lessening their workload. Yet, to acquire *masa* dough or ready-made tortillas required money and as *campesinos* began to purchase tortillas for everyday consumption the time it saved was used to earn outside income. In the end, the incorporation of peasants into the national economy came not through the elimination of maize, but rather through its negotiated commodification.

These changes also had an impact on the urban middleclass. Once the capitalist economy had incorporated maize, an emerging middle class began to appropriate the tortilla as a symbol of Mexican national identity. The first stirrings of this can be seen in the work of artists like Diego Rivera, whose portraits “The Grinder” and “Tortilla Makers” depict a nostalgic image of peasant women at work on their *comal*. It also took place in the kitchens of middleclass housewives who began inventing a national cuisine that incorporated foods from diverse cultural regions in cookbooks and helped to establish a sense of nationhood reflecting the increasingly collective experience of an integrated domestic market (Pilcher, 1998).

In this context of nation building and development, maize and the tortilla were both commodified, but they were commodified within the specific limits of the nation-state. The tortilla embodied both a means of uniting diverse peoples as well as the tensions and inequalities that accompanied industrialization and modernity. The state apparatus sustained these internal tensions and in this sense, reflected the moral implicit in the Mayan myth that described the tortilla’s origin. The government’s strategies for meeting the welfare needs of the people were linked to the people’s staple food, the tortilla. Maize and the tortilla circulated in protected markets, reinforcing the cultural criteria that viewed the tortilla as somehow incommensurable and incapable of being subjected to an unregulated free market economy, while subtly securing a place for the state in the sacred relationship that linked the people to their rulers.

### *Epoch 4: Globalization*

In the mid 1970s, fundamental changes were taking place in the political economy of international relations and in tortilla production itself that spoke to a deeper transformation of the meaning of the tortilla. While the industrialization of tortilla production had been evolving for some time, the process had remained

essentially the same. Wet maize was ground into *masa*, which was shaped into flat disks, which were cooked to produce tortillas. However, in 1975, as a result of collaborative research between the private corporation Maseca and the government enterprise Minsa, *masa harina* or tortilla flour production surpassed 500,000 tons for the first time in history (Pilcher, 1998).

Today, most industrial tortilla production begins with a dry flour base. This switch from dough to flour represents one of the most fundamental changes in the recipe of the tortilla since pre-colonial times. The meaning of this transformation might be understood in terms of the name given to maize dough by the Aztecs, for whom the dough symbolized “the flesh of the people.” In this sense, we can speak, materially, of the shift to dry flour as the desiccation or drying out of the maize dough and perhaps, symbolically, we might speak of the desecration of tortilla culture.

To explore the import of this symbolism, we must first place modern tortilla production in the social and economic context of globalization and particularly in the context of the neo-liberal economic project of international organizations like the IMF, World Bank, and WTO. When Mexico defaulted on its loans in 1982, it was forced to initiate “structural adjustment programs” that dismantled the *ejido* system, privatized public agencies, and began to reduce and eliminate subsidies to farmers and consumers. A concern with market stability replaced a concern with tortilla welfare and NAFTA signaled the culmination of this shift in the priorities of the Mexican government. Maize was reunited with corn and exposed to the global market where cheap US corn swamped Mexican producers, driving small farmers, millers, and tortillería owners out of production, pushing them off their land and out of a livelihood. Faced with increasing poverty, many of these farmers and workers were forced to accept low wages in export industries or to migrate to urban centers and foreign nations in order to find work.

While “IMF food riots” have resulted from structural adjustment programs in some parts of the world (Walton and Seddon, 1994; Friedmann, 1999), the Mexican government has developed new food assistance initiatives targeted specifically at low-income households in conjunction with the elimination of their general subsidies on maize and the tortilla. Programs of this kind are part of a gradual process aimed at weaning the Mexican people off the tortilla and feeding them with money. Progresa, the most recent food assistance program, exemplifies these dynamics and is expected to eventually replace all the other programs (Gundersen et al., 2000a, b). Created in 1997, it provides a financial stipend of 110 pesos per month rather than tortillas to female heads of household.

On the one hand, designating women recognizes their role at the hearth, at the center of *comida*. On the other hand, the government’s money-food imposes upon this inner space the outside criteria of money equivalency. Consequently, within the commodity context of Progresa, the types of foods available for food assistance recipients is relatively unrestricted, at least in the sense promoted by the USDA, which argues “when prices rise in one product, individuals can purchase lower priced substitutes” (Gundersen et al., 2000b). Of course, the proposition that a corn tortilla valued at one dollar is somehow commensurable with a slice of wonder bread valued at fifty cents may not appear tenable in actual practice. Nonetheless, the USDA sees promise in the Progresa context and suggests, “if Mexico increases food imports to meet the needs of its food assistance programs, US producers will reap some of the benefits.” Because Progresa does not restrict food assistance to specific commodities, it “has the potential to increase consumption of a variety of foods reflecting consumers’ taste” or, perhaps, reflecting the depth of their wallet (Gundersen et al., 2000a).

Increasingly, impoverished Mexicans like the tomato workers described by Barndt (1997) and Friedmann (1999) cannot afford to buy the food they pick and without the *ejido* they cannot grow it either. Poor consumers in Mexico who participate in Progresa may in fact purchase cheap US food products rather than the staple tortilla. But to portray this as a choice or a reflection of “consumers’ taste” is to subscribe to the myth of social and cultural commensurability nascent in the market metaphor, a myth that is encouraged by the money being offered as food to the Mexican *campesinos*. It is to ignore the social, economic, and cultural contexts in which these particular Mexicans exist.

As NAFTA dismantles tortilla welfare, new kings emerge. Today, Robert Gonzalez Barrera is the self-described “King of the Tortilla” (Wheat, 1996). He is the owner of Maseca-Gruma, the world’s leading producer of corn flour and tortillas, and the peasant’s tortilla has helped to make him a Forbes magazine billionaire. The new tortilla royalty are managers of transnational corporations whose market is the world, but to realize this market these corporations have transformed the meaning and the material makeup of the tortilla to fit the contexts and cultural criteria of a global market. Mike Tamayo of La Tortilla Factory puts it bluntly, “it will be important that the tortilla industry step forward and help shape [the tortilla’s] image in the consumer’s mind” (quoted in Cornell, 1998).

Shaping our image of the tortilla has often meant distancing the tortilla from its former meanings. The

increasingly popular “wraps” are tortillas redefined “to remove the association with strictly Mexican cuisine” (Bloom, 1998). Wraps, along with fast-food restaurants like World Wraps and Big City Wraps, are the modern descendents of the tortilla and the neighborhood *tortillería*. Wraps are made of wheat flour, which has always out-sold corn tortillas in the US by a margin of at least two to one. The wrap also lends itself to a variety of new flavor additives that generate tomato basil, pesto garlic, red chili, spinach, lime, banana, and blueberry flavored wraps. These hand-held global wraps can then be stuffed with peanut butter, cream cheese, hot dogs, Cajun seafood, or Thai chicken, living up to their new association with the global order, versatility, convenience, and a meaningless/ful quagmire of cultural taste and flavor sensations ripe and ready for consumption. As a global commodity, the tortilla has finally lost the battle with wheat.

Increasingly, the wrap does not arrive as such on the supermarket shelf, but presents itself as frozen burritos, enchiladas, or a variety of other products that are oven-ready and can be served and eaten in five minutes. The food industry calls these marketing strategies, “home meal replacements” (HMRS) or “meal solutions,” that quite literally are designed to substitute meals prepared in the home with mass-produced food commodities (Cornell, 1998). Home meal replacements may in fact be attractive in the context of modern time constraints and busy work schedules, but what exactly are they meant to replace? To accept the five-minute wrap as an alternative, as somehow fungible with the food-in-social-context in the sense of the hearth and *comida*, is to move one step closer to the realization of Margaret Radin’s “commodification as worldview.” Here, tortilla advertising departments employ the market metaphor, encouraging us to treat social and cultural relations as commodities, to see through a framework that would treat whatever cultural and social content is left in what we mean by a meal as somehow interchangeable with a wrap.

The tortilla is the fastest growing segment of the US baking industry (Cornell, 1998). Reconstructing the tortilla in new places and new times has been part of this growth as have changes in the tortilla industry itself. While the classic symbol of NAFTA is the image of US plants and jobs going south, Mexican plants are also moving north. In 1996, over 25,000 workers in the US produced \$2.5 billion worth of tortillas and they were almost all immigrant workers (Bacon, 1996).

As the tortilla makes its way into the homes, groceries, and labor markets of America, so too does it make its way into one of our archetypal cultural legacies. In February 2001, Mission Foods, a divi-

sion of Gruma and the largest tortilla manufacturer in the US, partnered with Disneyland Resort to build an “authentic tortilla factory attraction” at Disney’s California Adventure (Mission Foods Corporation, 2001). The undertaking is a celebration of the traditional food of Mexico and the role it plays in the Golden State’s cultural and culinary fabric. At the same time, in the Mission Tortilla Factory, both the historical narrative of the tortilla’s social life and the social context of tortilla production are commodified in a market space designed to attract the ubiquitous consumer.

Entering the Factory, one comes face-to-face with a series of murals that offer a visual history of the tortilla. The narrative begins with the ancient Mayans and traces the history of tortilla production from the “primitive stone ground methods” to the “modern” practices that rely on Maseca flour or *masa harina*. By the end of the narrative, the story is dominated by the technological innovations in tortilla production developed by Mission Foods, “leader of the ‘tortilla revolution,’” whose logo is tastefully displayed on several of the murals as it is on the ten piece packages of tortillas sold in our supermarkets. In the Factory, an actual working tortilla production line is also offered to the consumer’s gaze, and at the end of the tour visitors sample fresh tortillas right off the conveyor belt.

California’s Mission Tortilla Factory is one way of knowing the modern tortilla, but there is another side to the story. In Chicago, workers in the Azteca tortilla factory, almost all of whom are Spanish speaking Mexican immigrants, have organized within UE Local 1159 to demand better working conditions from one of the new tortilla kings, Azteca owner and millionaire Arthur Velasquez. Unlike the aestheticized Disney production line, these workers complain of very hot and very fast paced lines that have led to rashes, burns, and workplace injuries. On September 30, 2002, they began an unfair labor practices strike and their union began a campaign calling for a consumer boycott of Azteca tortilla products (United Electrical, Radio and Machine Workers of America, 2003).

Foods like the tortilla can become symbolic catalysts for public expressions of resistance. Another example of resistance occurred in August 2002, when McDonalds approached the city government of Oaxaca, a town in southern Mexico, with a proposal to install a restaurant on the city’s main square. The proposal sparked off a “debate about food, money, and power” (Weiner, 2002). Local residents organized demonstrations that featured an afternoon of feasting on locally produced tamales, salsa, café, and mole. Hundreds of people gathered at tables running the length of the east side of the square where leaflets were distributed and petitions against the proposal were signed.

Oaxaca is a “world capital of slow food” and is famous for its seven varieties of mole that can take three days to make, as well as its tamales baked slowly in a banana leaf (Weiner, 2002). In the words of Jacqueline Garcia, who runs a food stand in Oaxaca’s old market, “Real food is not frozen meat. Fast food’s unnatural. The people who make it are incompetent. And McDonald’s belongs to the United States, not our zócalo” (cited in Weiner, 2002).

The zócalo is the city square and the “war between slow food and fast food” sparked off by McDonalds’ proposal is about more than food preference or choice. It is about a consciousness and a way of life. For many local residents the zócalo is viewed as the heart of the city and it represents “a kind of sacred space” (Weiner, 2002). Francisco Toledo, a native of Oaxaca and one of Mexico’s best known living artists, describes it as “the center of our city, a place where people meet, talk politics, shop, and spend time. It’s a big influence on art and creativity. And we are drawing the line here against what the arches symbolize” (cited in Weiner, 2002). For many of the protestors, McDonald’s proposal to install a fast food restaurant in the heart of the city, albeit with “culturally sensitive” “McBurritos and jalapeño-topped McMuffins,” threatens the boundaries of this sacred space and symbolizes a profanation of not only food, but also food-in-social-context.

## Conclusions

Our purpose here has been to construct a narrative that invites discussion of the interconnected politics that exists across the boundaries of political economy and cultural/symbolic discourse. We do this by focusing on the entanglements of discursive and material exchanges between different groups of people that are apparent in the social life of the tortilla. Part of our narrative has focused on the ways in which the tortilla was “freed” from the sacred boundaries of *comida* and reconstructed as a world wrap. Pre-colonial Mesoamerican mythology and production practices suggest an understanding of the tortilla as an integral part of their personhood, culture, and social survival. Colonialism and nation building exposed this understanding of the tortilla to new ideas and practices that resulted in a series of cultural debates about the role of the tortilla in society. Through negotiations and compromises, the tortilla was reconstructed within a cultural framework and socioeconomic experience that kept it protected from complete subjugation to the increasingly powerful criteria of the market metaphor. Today, when Americans and Europeans consume Cajun spiced seafood in a red chili tortilla wrap or Thai chicken in a ginger tortilla with a large diet Coke “to

go,” we may very well be partaking of a tasteful sensation. However, this simultaneous amalgamation of cultural references and pleasurable tastes undergirds an increasingly powerful system of mass production and sociocultural disruption as well as the powerful worldview of the market metaphor.

One could interpret this story as an example of how the powerful homogenizing forces of capitalism and the market have commodified an authentic cultural food and its social context. Our intention has been to imply something more than this. How we know about and understand our food practices is important and we hope to have also suggested some of the ways in which commodification as worldview is contested and contestable. For example, the cookbook writers and middleclass homemeal makers who contributed to the establishment of a national cuisine and played a role in constructing a sense of national identity for the Mexican people provide one model of contestation. Menu’s and recipes can provide parameters or rules that guide the processes of making healthy, tasteful, and socially meaningful meals. When they are embedded in the cookbooks and discourse of groups like the Slow Food Movement (Miele and Murdoch, 2002), recipes provide not only guidelines for “cooking local” or “cooking slowly” but they also serve as identity references that connect participants to larger collective endeavors. Similarly, when we boycott Aztecha tortillas we do so in solidarity with the workers whose lives and labor we choose not to commodify. Such cultural politics alone may not resanctify our food but they can play a constitutive role in such an undertaking.

We are not suggesting here that we return to some imagined *comida*. As Harriet Friedman (1999) suggests, the relevant question is not whether the meals of the past were more life giving than the meals offered by today’s tortilla industry. Rather, the question we pose is whether the meals organized and presented by the tortilla industry are more life giving than other ways of making, eating, and knowing our meals. Considered in this light, the story of the tortilla offers an historical account of the ways in which everyday food practices are connected to broader cultural assumptions about living in society. It provides an opportunity to consciously reflect upon how our actions contribute to an understanding of the world that is informed by the market metaphor and to ask whether conceiving of personhood, work, sociality, cultural relations, and food as market transactions is the best way to achieve a better life. To ask such a question is to critically engage proponents of the market metaphor and their indicia of knowing and to create space for pursuing alternatives that are capable of enveloping new actions and new visions of the zócalo and the good life that

are life sustaining and consciously sacred rather than unconsciously exploitative.

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