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# THE SOCIAL RELATIONS OF MEXICAN COMMODITIES

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**POWER, PRODUCTION, AND PLACE**

Casey Walsh

Elizabeth Emma Ferry

Gabriela Sota Laveaga

Paola Sesia

Sarah Hill

**LA JOLLA, CALIFORNIA**

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# 6

## The Wasted Resources of *Mexicanidad*: Consumption and Disposal on Mexico's Northern Frontier

SARAH HILL

*[Mexican] recyclers affirm difference from the international market simply by existing. —Claudio Lomnitz-Adler, 2001: 118*

### PRELUDE: THE NATIONALITY OF GARBAGE

There is a story that some older garbage scavengers in Ciudad Juárez like to tell about the early years of their resource-recovery cooperative, Socosema. They tell it as an amusing but pointed illustration of the many struggles they have endured against a wide range of political opponents. Absurdly, in the early 1970s Socosema had to fight to get Ciudad Juárez's garbage recognized by the federal government as *Mexican*. When the cooperative faced a tax bill from the Finance Ministry (Hacienda) charging import duties on the recyclable materials the scavengers had recovered from the city's wastes, the cooperative countered with a very clever public response. "*Qué nacionalidad tiene la basura?*" (what nationality is garbage?), they provocatively asked in full-page newspaper ads, trying to draw on the sympathies of fellow *juarenses* who also felt neglected, exploited, or persecuted by the central government's notorious disdain for border residents

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(*fronterizos*). In fact, much of Ciudad Juárez's recyclable waste *did* originate in the United States, in the form of packaging for a good deal of the city's consumer merchandise. But Socosema insisted that since tax had already been paid by *fronterizo* shoppers who bought U.S. comestibles at local shops under special import arrangements exclusive to the border region (the "Artículos Ganchos" program), the discarded containers—cans, bottles, and cardboard—had *become* Mexican.

In doing so they made advantageous use of local metaphoric and material conditions. Among these at the time was the dominant economic logic governing the city's rapid expansion. Ciudad Juárez's burgeoning growth in the mid-1970s stemmed from a development model predicated on the value added by "unskilled" and docile (female) Mexican labor to imported American components that, once assembled in Mexico, were re-exported to the United States for retail markets. Critics from the early days of this "transformation industry"—dubbed *maquiladoras* in Mexico—had long lamented that such "development" did not develop Mexico at all (Lastra Meraz 1986; see also references in Salzinger 2003; Peña 1997). Instead, critics charged, it only exploited the one resource that Mexico had in superabundance: cheap labor.

Socosema turned this formula on its head by asserting that the mere act by Mexican workers of discarding unwanted American materials amounted to a nationalization of those materials, adding value that went far beyond the crude calculations of the gringo-controlled border economy. In fact, by contending that the act of disposal converted American secondary goods into a national resource, they playfully but persuasively challenged the maquiladora program's failure to Mexicanize goods wrought by the city's factory workers.

Consider, for example, that Socosema could have accused the Finance Ministry of double taxation—a reasonable claim given that Ciudad Juárez consumers had already paid sales tax on the materials that eventually found their way into the city's waste stream. Instead, the cooperative invoked nationality, nationhood, and, by implication, the very set of concerns and anxieties that had long plagued the nation's views of the northern border: that it lacked Mexican national culture and was instead a cheap, disposable version of its domineering neighbor to the north. Whereas maquiladora merchandise sold in the United States bore little or no imprint of Mexico (most U.S. consumers in the 1970s were unaware that their televisions and blue jeans came from Mexico), the cooperative, in its fight with the ministry, symbolically planted a very bold symbolic "made

in Mexico" label on the city's garbage. The hard work of the city's factory laborers was invisible in the city's primary export products (such invisibility was part of the very premise of the maquiladora program, that goods made in Mexico would look just like goods made in the United States; see especially Wright 1999). By contrast, the nearly effortless Mexican labor of disposal *added* "mexicanidad" to the city's wastes.

By insisting that disposal in Mexico made U.S. materials into Mexican garbage, the cooperative tapped, however unwittingly, into a deep reservoir of ambivalence about national identity and modernity, both on the border and in the interior. Briefly put, Mexican intimacy with wastes has long stood as a durable symbol of both Mexico's unique, authentic, indigenous, and peasant essence in the world's family of nations and its failure to extend the promise of modernization to all its citizenry. On the one hand, garbage scavenging and "Mexican recycling," as Claudio Lomnitz-Adler has put it, serves as a treasured index of mexicanidad: Mexicans are resourceful, and Mexico's organic aesthetic makes creative use of items whose original use has expired (Lomnitz-Adler 2001). But on the other hand, this same messy impulse of rescue and reuse runs counter to the larger global logic and goal of modernization: to improve standards of living by—among other things—separating human beings from all things dirty and unhygienic, especially as defined by western biomedicine and industrial technophilia (see Douglas 1966; Elias 1978).

In this way, cooperative members proved their mexicanidad in a manner not really available to factory workers: they showed their willingness and commitment to make use of wastes in a manner that placed them, despite their geographic location on the border of the "modern" United States, squarely within the "traditional" practices of mexicanidad. But the very nature of the cooperative's business—low-tech, nonmechanized sorting of wastes—placed its members at odds with border elites' intentions to drag the rest of the country into the modernization that had been so long delayed by earlier government economic development programs.

If Mexican national identity expressed anxiety toward modernity and modernization through an ambivalence about garbage, refuse, and junk, then this ambivalence was even more pronounced on the northern border. Despite mexicanidad's notoriously ambiguous definition, by virtue of the fact that its chief characteristic was the melding of unlike things (the Spanish and the Indian, for example), *fronterizos* were particularly sensitive to accusations that they embodied too much that is non-Mexican—the consumer goods of the United States.

For decades, *fronterizos* had endured allegations that their consumption of American culture sullied them and made them “less Mexican.” They endured the persisting belief in Mexico that “the border is a constant source of contamination and threats to Mexican nationality” (Bartra 2002: 11; see also Zúñiga 1992; Bustamante 1992; Barrera 1996; Álvarez 1984: 120; Fox 1999: 2; Lomnitz-Adler 2001: 138–39; Spota 1948). Yet Socosema insisted that American boxes, cans, and bottles had become Mexican, irrespective of the nationality of their contents, because these items had been *thrown away* in Mexico. With deliberate irony, in an effort to assert their own Mexican-ness, the cooperative embraced the very discourse of degeneration and pollution that was fiercely rejected by most other *fronterizos*, anxious to demonstrate that the border was not simply disposable *gringolandia*.

For a number of years the cooperative’s peculiar melding of counter-modernization and *mexicanidad* guided its thriving business and made its members quite prosperous relative to *maquiladora* worker families.<sup>1</sup> But by the time I encountered the cooperative in October 1994, its glory days seemed to have faded. I first met cooperative members on a momentous occasion: the day before the Sanitation Department was to close the city dump—which for twenty years had been the cooperative members’ primary home, for both production and social reproduction—and relocate waste interment to a new sanitary landfill at the far edge of the municipal limits. In the coming months, cooperative members grimly watched active membership rolls plummet as they struggled against the Sanitation Department’s stated mission to “clean” waste management of the scavengers and their old-fashioned ways.

A number of explanations for the cooperative’s downward spiral circulate in Ciudad Juárez. Because of the cooperative’s once-storied success and its present somewhat endangered existence, there is a strong temptation to speculate on what went wrong. In this chapter I concern myself less with these speculations and more with what “modern” and “*mexicanidad*” have meant in a city that has fought with and against the central government for both modernization and recognition as Mexican. The remainder

<sup>1</sup> “*Maquiladora* worker families” do not really exist as such, since few families survive for long on the income of just one *maquiladora* employee (see Salzinger 2003). Most *maquiladora* worker households have a number of employed members, some in the formal sector, others in the informal sector. Despite the fact that Socosema families looked in many respects like *maquiladora* worker families, they maintained that they enjoyed higher incomes.

of this chapter is divided into four parts. In the first, I provide a brief account of the city elites’ struggles in the mid-twentieth century to fashion their city into one that could overturn the widespread denigrating stereotypes of the border commonly reproduced throughout Mexico. In the following section, I turn to Socosema’s skillful mining of two competing elite discourses—that of the border and that of the interior—to fashion its own modernist project. In the final sections I explore some of the implications of more recent developments in Ciudad Juárez for the relationship between garbage, modernity, and *mexicanidad*.

At the heart of this exploration lie paradoxes in Mexico’s ambivalent relationship to the modern capitalist market and its holy grail, the unfettered commodity. As Marx observed long ago, commodities entail transformations: producers of commodities under capitalism become mere appendages to the means of production, while consumers mistake commodity relationships for human relationships (Marx 1977). In the following discussion, we see how Ciudad Juárez elites worried in the mid-twentieth century about the weakening of national identity that seemed to accrue in the consumption of American commodities along the northern border. As a corrective, they attempted to supplant American mass consumer culture in Ciudad Juárez with Mexican mass consumer culture. This effort set the stage for Socosema’s battle with the Finance Ministry over the refuse generated by *Artículos Ganchos* and the nationality of Ciudad Juárez’s garbage. In turn, the *Artículos Ganchos* incident reinforced Socosema’s attempts to produce *mexicanidad* not through commodity consumption, but through an unusual form of commodity production (the transformation of garbage into resources), to which we will turn later.

Before I address the city elites’ mid-century efforts to force local *mexicanidad*, it is useful to define some terms. My distinction between “modernization” and “modernity” refers to two different but related processes. I use “modernization” in reference to a steadily increasing use of industrial technology to meet basic and emerging human needs. Modernity, on the other hand, indexes a range of ideological discourses associated with modernization: the prizing of mechanization over earlier “antiquated” technologies, a faith in scientific rationalism and secularism, and the belief that social justice will accrue in association with the generalization of new technologies.

As for *mexicanidad*, it is useful to recall not the particular content of *mexicanidad* (because this, as we shall see, is always in dispute), but the sustaining notion in Mexico that *mexicanidad* is the uniquely Mexican

amalgamated sense of self that emerges from competing histories or influences. Since independence, Mexico's national and state legitimacy have always traded on the alluring and fecund imagery of the "hybrid,"<sup>2</sup> an almost mystical construction at the heart of both state-sponsored and popular ideas essential to "*lo mexicano*." To take the most famous example: the ideal of the *mestizo*, which was so crucial to postrevolutionary state construction, embodies the conjoining of the pre-Columbian Indian to the conquering Spaniard. While it is important to note that the governing rule for the production of "*lo mexicano*" is the convergence of otherwise incompatible or unlike elements, a crucial feature for the combinations in Mexican hybridity has historically relied on constructions of the *past* to signify the *dominant* characteristic of *lo mexicano*. Briefly put, this has meant that historically the *mexicano* version of modernity did not fully reject the past but sought instead to incorporate it in a variety of complicated and sometimes patently disingenuous ways, as we shall see in a later section.

## MEXICANIZING THE BORDER

*The whole Mexican border is a great brothel for the gringos.* — Luis Spota, 1948

*I consider the neighboring nation as one of the best in the world, and I believe that in a variety of aspects Mexico ... can imitate her with dignity.... But there exists an enormous difference between this attitude and that of considering all that is Yankee to be superior.* — Antonio Bermúdez, 1943

I begin this section with two mid-twentieth-century epigraphs. The first, penned by writer Luis Spota, captures a common if unflattering sentiment of mainstream, centrist Mexican thought at the time. In this line of thinking, the border is irredeemably tainted by its association with the United States, like a prostitute who can never recover her virginity, and consequently is incapable of returning to a state of (virginal) national purity. The second epigraph, penned five years earlier by then-mayor of Ciudad

<sup>2</sup> As both García Canclini and Lomnitz-Adler point out, though in very different ways, Mexican intellectuals' chauvinistic exceptionalism notwithstanding, Mexico's hybridity is far from an atypical nationalism among what Lomnitz-Adler calls "weak" nations. See García Canclini 1990; Lomnitz-Adler 2001: chap. 6.

Juárez, Antonio Bermúdez, provides a window onto the challenges faced by high-minded, civic-oriented border elites who continually weathered the prejudices of Spota and the like: how to negotiate with their neighbors to the north without at best—in the estimation of Mexico City critics—capitulating to them in culture, style, and attitude, or at worst, becoming ruined in the process. The Bermúdez passage also points to the particular way in which border elites and border intellectuals attempted to take the *mexicanidad* principle of dualism or hybridity as the defining criterion for *mexicanidad*, and not the particular content of any dualist or hybrid construction. As Bermúdez points out, judicious appropriation of the Yankee can be useful for the Mexican.

Bermúdez, as the mid-century defender of Ciudad Juárez, provides a useful origin point for our background on Socosema's efforts to produce *mexicanidad* through the detritus of cross-border trade in consumer goods because from his local start he ascended to national economic and political power of iconic proportions. Following his stint as mayor of Ciudad Juárez, Bermúdez parlayed his successful ownership of dozens of filling stations in Chihuahua into a decade-long appointment at the helm of the most Mexican of Mexican companies, the state-owned petrochemical giant, Pemex.<sup>3</sup> After his retirement from Pemex, he turned his attention once again to the problems of nation and development along the border with the launching of a multimillion-peso project, the National Border Program (Pronaf) in 1961. Rightly or wrongly, under Bermúdez's tutelage Pronaf was widely credited as having jumpstarted the export-oriented industrialization of the border. Ostensibly a "beautification" undertaking, Pronaf revealed Bermúdez's ambitions to Mexicanize the border. Because of the vastness of its effort to unmake the border as popularly imagined in the center, Pronaf in fact conceded to some degree the validity, if not the durability, of such characterizations.

These two epigraphs, then, mark two different elite views of the border that continue to this day. One is the centrist, which regards the border effect on *mexicanidad* as permanent. The other is the *fronterizo*, which

<sup>3</sup> Pemex is the quintessential Mexican *national* company. Wrested from the control of Standard Oil and other foreign companies by Lázaro Cárdenas in 1938, Pemex quickly assumed monumental status in the Mexican national imagination. As Sandy Tolan writes, Cárdenas's decision "remains one of the most significant acts of national sovereignty over natural resources ever taken" (Tolan 2002), a fact that is known by every living Mexican. As heavy industry powered by masculinist visions of the nation, Pemex symbolized, both before and after Bermúdez, national independence and international market potency.

regards the border effect as temporal and contextual, and therefore infinitely salvageable through application of the correct (elite) guidance and resources.

Most historians of the Mexican border region attribute *fronterizo* social and cultural customs to the long isolation of border towns from political and commercial influence by the rest of the country.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, until the arrival of the national rail line in 1881, residents in Paso del Norte (as Ciudad Juárez was known until 1888) had to meet virtually all of their basic consumer needs through either wholesale or retail vendors in El Paso, who, relative to their counterparts in Ciudad Juárez, enjoyed reasonably reliable access to manufactured merchandise through the burgeoning nineteenth-century transcontinental trade that accompanied westward expansion in the United States. Thus, from the beginnings of the city's life as a border outpost, elites in Ciudad Juárez have battled the federal government for control of local economy and society while at the same time seeking to demonstrate to the rest of the country Ciudad Juárez's authenticity and legitimacy as a Mexican city. Accordingly, the city's elites have long sought both federal assistance for and approval of their inevitable, inescapable relations with their Yankee neighbors (Martínez 1978; Chávez 1991; Santiago Quijada 2002; González de la Vara 2002). In this, Bermúdez is exemplary.

Given Ciudad Juárez's historical dependency on El Paso and its corresponding neglect by the national government (both before and after the revolution), it is not surprising that a mayor like Bermúdez, with national ambitions, would commit himself to municipal projects that in retrospect look like a dress rehearsal for Pronaf. As mayor, Bermúdez sought to both beautify and modernize the city, according to his 1943 *Gaceta Municipal*. This handsomely bound book, with its numerous photographic plates, illustrates Bermúdez's mark on Ciudad Juárez: a new library, new prison, new market, and so on. But one brief section might strike the reader as a bit pretentious for a mayoral report: the section titled "International Relations." Here Bermúdez somewhat defensively insisted that, by necessity, he cultivated warm and effective relations with his counterpart in El Paso, whom he regarded as an admirable representative of a very admirable country. And lest anyone accuse Bermúdez of having "*ayancando*" ("Yankified"), he employed the *Gaceta* to set the record straight. Indeed, he

<sup>4</sup> Guadalupe Santiago Quijada (2002: 23) notes that Mexico lost half its territory at the end of the Mexican American War (1848) because underpopulation in the far north left those vast tracts vulnerable to the expansionist appetites of the United States.

claimed, it took no small effort on his part to create sentiments of affection, confidence, and respect within all classes in El Paso for the people and authorities of Ciudad Juárez (Bermúdez 1943: 11).

Bermúdez and his successors walked a fine line between conceding national stereotypes of the border and lobbying for the resources to overcome the condition—the city's exclusion from modernization—that gave the stereotypes at least a kernel of truth. During the 1940s and 1950s, with the growth of U.S. army personnel at El Paso's Fort Bliss and the emerging market for divorces available in Ciudad Juárez, Mexico's national press seized upon (and greatly amplified) Ciudad Juárez's unsavory reputation as a haven for prostitution, smuggling, and drugs. Reporters gleefully gave Ciudad Juárez nicknames such as "Pocha Babylon" (pocho/a being a derogatory Mexican term for Mexican Americans who have "lost" their culture; Babylon suggesting that the Spanish language did not dominate the city), "Black City of Mexico," "Swamp of Immorality," "Gomorrhah City," "New Sodom," "Sin City," "Center of Vice," "Center of Corruption," and "Center of Prostitution" (Martínez 1978: 102).

In response, juarenses felt compelled to defend their sobriety, temperance, morality, refinement, nationality, and modernity in a single breath. "We hope that the whole republic comprehends us and understands our mexicanidad, for through our service clubs and scientific organizations ... we defend our language, art, customs, religion, songs, and everything that makes us feel proud of living on the border to carry out the role of first defenders of our native soil" (*A Todo Máquina*, cited in Martínez 1978: 106). If Bermúdez and his successors felt that the mayor's job entailed ambassadorial tasks to represent the nation's interests in the United States, then the job also required mayors to engage in acts of cultural translation of the border itself on behalf of the very nation for which they sat on the front lines of defense every day.

René Mascareñas, who served as mayor at the end of the 1950s, knew this dual challenge well. In fact, he described himself publicly as more Mexican than the Mexican national government. For Mascareñas, this meant sustaining a vision of modernity along the border that the federal government failed to fulfill. Born in Los Angeles in 1917 to wealthy refugees of the Mexican Revolution, Mascareñas was raised—he claimed—by fiercely nationalist parents who, paradoxically, sent him to private schools in El Paso.<sup>5</sup> In Mascareñas's view, Ciudad Juárez's reputation as a city of

<sup>5</sup> This was not a paradox that Mascareñas commented on, nor did he comment in his autobiographical interview on the racism that kept Mexican children in highly

sin came largely and shamefully not from the Americans, but from "the very Mexicans of the interior of the republic, who without ever having set foot on the border, without knowing Ciudad Juárez ... have criticized the border as something negative" (Mascareñas Miranda 1976a).

During his mayoral administration Mascareñas officially declared these perceived problems of Ciudad Juárez to be of the federal government's own making. In one municipal report he chastised the government for failing to allocate sufficient funds for the care of migrants who came to Ciudad Juárez to find "a better way of life." He concluded: "The municipality does not have its own sources of income in proportion to the tasks and responsibilities it is obliged to carry out" (Mascareñas Miranda 1993: 12). For the tens of thousands who streamed into border cities over the middle decades of the twentieth century, not only did the border threaten corruption of national essence; it also held out the hope of prosperity and the creature comforts of modern life.

To Antonio Bermúdez, the problem with this prospective prosperity was the flag in which it was enveloped. Because the stars and stripes, and not Mexico's "tricolor" of red, green, and white, beckoned migrants to the border, Pronaf (launched only two years after Mascareñas's impassioned appeal) promised both real prosperity and the retention of mexicanidad for those who were otherwise—understandably—forced to abandon their national banner in the quest for conveniences and merchandise emblematic of Mexico's rapidly emerging mass consumer society.

Oddly for an industrialist, Bermúdez's interest lay first, not in the development of border industry, but in stimulating the local market for Mexican-made consumer goods. This emphasis on consumerism as a first line of national cultural defense and as a necessary precondition for industrial take-off reveals an undeniable anxiety on the part of Ciudad Juárez elites about the quality of mexicanidad possessed by working-class juarenses and other fronterizos (the passage quoted above from *A Todo Máquina* notwithstanding). To resolve the problem of mexicanidad and modernization on the border, Bermúdez proposed a holistic made-in-Mexico solution that would both strengthen national identity and advance modernity: a beefed-up offering of Mexican-manufactured breadbasket items for the laboring/popular classes, well-made Mexican-manufactured durable goods for the middle and upper classes, and tantalizing tourist temptations—*artesanías*—for prosperous foreigners (some of whom might well be of

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segregated El Paso public schools in the 1940s and 1950s. On segregation in El Paso schools, see García 1981.

Mexican ancestry). At the same time, Bermúdez regarded the Pronaf's planned sumptuous displays of cultural production—dance performances, art exhibits, and musical events—from throughout Mexico as helpfully didactic for Ciudad Juárez's residents, who in his view knew far too little of Mexico.

This holistic view aimed also to attract foreign investment interest in Mexico by showcasing Mexican culture, artisan production, and industry. On the opening page of its first promotional booklet, Pronaf promised to deliver "the high mission of showing foreigners a Mexico aligned with [both] reality and the excellency of her authentic values" (Pronaf 1961: 2). Reading carefully, I think we can see a mexicano dualism at work: "reality" here signals the modern, capitalist industrial world, while "authentic values" refers to the essence of the Mexican nation that persists in the face of modernization and modernity. In order to wed "reality" to "authentic values," Bermúdez commandeered millions of pesos for the construction of parks, museums, auditoriums, and universities near the principal ports of entry in border cities. These Pronaf Centers would welcome foreign visitors to Mexico's finest cultural offerings, encourage them to buy Mexican goods, and eventually—one presumes—stimulate investment in Mexican industry.

Because at the time of Pronaf's inauguration El Paso offered dry goods at prices far below those in Ciudad Juárez, the Pronaf package incorporated alluring incentives for Mexican mass-consumer-goods firms. These included exemption from certain federal taxes and reductions in freight charges for shipping to the border (Martínez 1978: 119–22). Pronaf banked on the multiplier effect of this economic stimulus and, as a bonus, the awakening of a taste for Mexican merchandise among border residents who had grown accustomed, by necessity, to shopping in the better-stocked and cheaper stores of El Paso (Martínez 1978: 117). Unfortunately Pronaf could do little to overturn conventions of crossing the border to sate appetites for American brands such as Best Foods mayonnaise and Heinz ketchup (just two items that friends in Ciudad Juárez recall with fond but slightly embarrassed memories from their childhoods in the 1960s and 1970s). As historian Oscar Martínez reveals, Ciudad Juárez's ability to retain pesos in the city's consumer market fell by 32 percent from 1965 to 1970 (Martínez 1978: 119). In 1971, Mexican shoppers made 62 percent of their expenditures north of the border, dropping some US\$57.9 million in El Paso's coffers.

Not all of this shopping was "unnecessary," Bermúdez, Mascareñas, and other leading city elites acknowledged. According to local estimates, juarenses spent over US\$4.9 million in El Paso on breadbasket items—poultry, lard, canned milk, and pinto beans—not readily available in Ciudad Juárez, despite the elites' best efforts to get Mexican versions of these items onto local grocery shelves. Enter, thus, the Artículos Ganchos program ("hook" goods), which would supply impoverished Mexicans with the basic goods they needed for survival, without forcing them to sell their nationality in the process.

Despite the decades they spent lobbying for such a program, when Artículos Ganchos was inaugurated in 1971 it caught Ciudad Juárez elites and the local old guard of the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) by surprise. Since the 1950s, Bermúdez, Mascareñas, and others had advocated allowing the duty-free importation of those "first necessity" items (like the four noted above) that figured prominently in the diets of Ciudad Juárez's most disadvantaged residents (and which, despite Pronaf incentives to Mexican manufacturers, remained unavailable on the border). By so doing, they reasoned, shoppers could obtain those basic goods in local shops, obviating the need to cross the border. Once in Mexican stores for their basic purchases, they would presumably snap up Mexican brands that met the rest of their consumption needs. But Artículos Ganchos quickly became something else entirely. In short order, the range of goods imported duty-free from El Paso expanded far beyond breadbasket items (Mascareñas Miranda 1976b). Mascareñas complained, as did Bermúdez in his interview with Martínez, that the Artículos Ganchos program had gone awry when it was extended to fancy stereo equipment, televisions, and liquor.

In their criticisms of the distorted legacy of Artículos Ganchos, both Bermúdez and Mascareñas assumed "more nationalist than thou" postures. To Bermúdez, the indiscriminate opening of the Artículos Ganchos program to all manner of American goods demonstrated the Mexican government's unabashed lack of concern for both national manufacturers (which could not compete along the border against their U.S. counterparts) and the need for fomenting mexicanidad in a region that constantly undermined national identity (see Bermúdez 1968). From the local elites' viewpoint, Artículos Ganchos should have complemented Pronaf. Instead it helped undermine the *national* part of the border program and thus amplified the border's longer-standing problem: its purported lack of attachment to national culture.

### MEXICANIZING THEMSELVES: FROM SCAVENGERS TO SOCIOS

That the elites of Ciudad Juárez should express such anxiety over both the lack of modernization and the fragility of national essence on the border is somewhat ironic given that, during the years under consideration, modernization failed to make more than a teasing, ghostly appearance in many areas across the nation. And wherever it did take hold in full force, the consequences for mexicanidad left both cynical intellectuals and anxious ruling party elites concerned that the nation might question the legitimacy of the governing regime. If the border, reputedly so like the United States, had not modernized, where, then, had modernization occurred, and what were its effects on mexicanidad? In one set of readings of Mexico's frustrated encounter with modernization, it had been a failure, leaving the national landscape littered with the remnants and refuse of a colossal and tragic disaster. Instead of uniformly raising standards of living in the countryside, it propelled peasants displaced by agricultural mechanization onto the burgeoning—but not modernizing—urban fringes, where they became the bypassed and overlooked cultural and social wastes of economic planning gone awry. In another reading, modernization was not (yet) a failure. It was simply but tragically incomplete. In either reading, for many critics Mexican modernization left modernity always deferred, forever forestalled.

Whatever foundering courses of modernization and mexicanidad the state pursued in the middle decades of the twentieth century, it is probably safe to say that for Ciudad Juárez's garbage scavengers in the 1960s, modernization's effect on mexicanidad was not high on their list of concerns. Instead, in their recounting of life at the city dump before the cooperative was established, they spent those years bitterly fighting each other. On the horizons of their misery they saw not the central government's neglect of the border cities or the failure of national economic development.<sup>6</sup> Instead, they saw the man who controlled them in the present and who maintained a chokehold on their destiny. They saw only *el dueño*: the city's concessionaire of recyclable materials, for whom they labored. In their reconstructions of the cooperative's beginnings, they remember the time before as one of telescoped vision and extremely limited social engagement with the distant city. They did not have the "custom," they say, of going "down to the city," which they could view several kilometers away from their perch on the

<sup>6</sup> It is hard to imagine that they did not have *some* analysis of national development or national politics. But the way they narrate their history today makes it seem like they did not.



folds of the Sierra de Juárez. Instead, the dueño brought what little they knew of the city to them, in the trucks laden with garbage and wastes.

They understood the American origins of some of that material. Though many were illiterate, it was not hard for them to discern Yankee labels. Nor was it hard to establish the subtle but important differences between U.S. and Mexican packaging. The differing weight of tin and aluminum cans, the characteristic shape and thickness of glass bottles, and the texture, durability, and pliancy of cardboard boxes all gave clues to the national origin of waste materials. These tactile differences did not present problems of national identity for the scavengers. Instead, they constituted workplace challenges to be mastered: many of the materials plucked from the dump had to be sorted in order to secure their redemption from scrap buyers who paid differential rates for Mexican and American materials.<sup>7</sup> In fact, learning to discern Mexican from American wastes became even more important after the founding of the cooperative, when the scavengers themselves negotiated with the buyers of recyclable refuse.

The cooperative came to life in the early 1970s through the help of two scions of Ciudad Juárez's most powerful and well-known families. At the time, Pronaf, now more than a decade old, had begun to look like it had delivered on Bermúdez's gambit to lure industrial development to the city. Unfortunately, to some Ciudad Juárez residents, this industry bore a striking resemblance to Artículos Ganchos: it primarily benefited American owners of capital who used cheap Mexican labor to put finishing touches on American commodities that would then be returned for sale to American consumers. While the maquiladora "machine," as Devon Peña poetically put it in 1997, hungered for ever greater numbers of Mexican laborers, it did little fundamentally either to secure modernist visions of a bright, shiny, frontier city filled with an educated, urbane workforce, or to nourish the mexicanidad of those workers chained to factory production lines.

Wary of this emerging form of industrial development, an unlikely collection of charismatic Catholics stumbled upon Ciudad Juárez's city dump on Christmas Day, 1972. They came with dinner and groceries, inspired by both a passion for the Holy Spirit and an abiding dislike for the ills of the savage capitalism booming all around them. Within a short time

<sup>7</sup> American materials did not necessarily command higher rates. For example, some materials that were quite valuable—medicine bottles, for example—were Mexican, while their American counterparts had little or no value because they had no buyers.

(or after some months, depending on who is telling the story), these impassioned visitors realized that the scavengers, if organized into a cooperative, had the potential to counteract the most deleterious effects of wage laboring upon the city's working class.

To Guillermina Valdés-Villalva, a U.S.-educated sociologist, and her friend, local businessman Francisco Villarreal, the scavengers exemplified the worst of exploitation by the Mexican political system in particular and by the capitalist system in general. They found the scavengers subordinated to a powerful boss, Raúl Ibarra, who through his extensive connections to the ruling party had secured the concession for this extremely lucrative business. Ibarra took advantage of the tools the PRI provided in order to super-exploit his workers. New arrivals to the dump (often the poorest and most disadvantaged rural emigrants) were obliged to join one of two unions, each belonging to a different national coalition of unions that formed part of the formal corporatist structure of the PRI. These unions—La Liga y El CROC—effectively quelled any potential worker unrest or militancy by diverting frustration for miserly payment and unspeakable work conditions away from Ibarra and toward members of the opposing union.

In those days "*el enemigo*" (the enemy), cooperative members now recall, was not Ibarra, the capitalist system, or the corrupt union movement. Instead, "*el enemigo*" for the members of each union was the other union. In their recounting of the cooperative, they recall that Guillermina lifted the veils from their eyes when she arrived that Christmas in 1972. She illuminated the systematic ways in which the true wealth to be made from the materials in the dump had been hidden from them, as well as Ibarra's wily tactics for diverting their attention from his prosperity. Guillermina, they now say, "*nos daba la luz*" (showed us the light).

Guillermina Valdés-Villalva, one of the maquiladora program's loudest and most effective local critics, schooled the scavengers in the mechanics of capitalism, and in so doing helped guide them toward productive ownership of their own means of production. To Jesús Montenegro, Guillermina's longtime confidant and assistant, the transformation at the dump was cataclysmic. Following the initial Christmas visit, many members of Guillermina's prayer group returned frequently to the dump with bags of groceries, medicines, and other crucial supplies. But after a time, they began to worry that the material support offered to the scavengers would only "give them the problems that we are trying to overcome," according to another group member. Even though pride prevented the scavengers

from accepting handouts without some kind of payment, as they grew comfortable with Guillermina and the others, their desires for material goods gradually increased, particularly their desire for the very "artículos ganchos" that nationalistic city elites despised.

Guillermina saw the scavengers' emergent consumerism as a sign that prosperity would lure them into the materialism of the bourgeois marketplace; the fact that the marketplace in Ciudad Juárez was American in origin seemed to be beside the point for Guillermina and the other prayer group members (in contrast to the concerns of Mascareñas and Bermúdez). Guillermina thus embarked on a path to spiritual salvation by guiding the scavengers toward collective self-reliance against the divisive materialism of the marketplace. According to Montenegro, "she sought to find a way of transforming the material basis of the *pepenadores'* (scavengers') lives." She got them to understand that their personal differences were the product of economic systems working upon them, and she taught them to do an accounting of the profits collected from their labor.

With help from Guillermina and Francisco Villarreal, the cooperative came to life. Within a few years, the *pepenadores* had become *socios*, partners in their own recycling business, complete with the concession (which they won away from Ibarra in a very public fight) secured for twenty-five years. Most important in their own minds, the cooperative members had become the collective authors of their own shared destiny. Low-interest loans obtained from private and state sources buoyed their business prospects and their dreams for the future. Montenegro makes clear that while a spiritual vision first drew Guillermina to the dump, she quickly grounded her efforts there in the hard reality of state and economy: "Guillermina was very committed to the class struggle," he confirms. She saw a chance to put the brakes on the savage capitalism then emerging in the city with the steady growth of U.S. and other foreign firms that had come to exploit Mexico's cheap, vulnerable labor. She also worked her considerable political capital to effect by pushing through the cooperative's paperwork and by securing land from the federal government on which the cooperative's members could construct their homes. By the late 1970s, they had abandoned their humble shanties and built sturdy adobe houses on land gifted and titled by the city government to each socio head of household.

After the cooperative's founding, the members called themselves *socios* to signify their shift out of wage laboring and into shared ownership of their business. The material change in their lives was readily apparent.

Here is a passage from the official history of Socosema, redacted by one of the founding members, Isabel Robles:

Now many of the cooperative members have one or two trucks and houses made of cinderblock or adobe. No one lives in cardboard or tin shacks anymore. Medicine, bathrooms, hospitalization, funerals—these are all paid for by the cooperative. Our income is direct now, without middlemen. This has all come of the seed that was Socosema, this seed that is now flourishing and has emerged from the earth. And we hope that it will continue to flower into the future. Thanks to those who led us through our first steps, who guided us along this road, because now Socosema is united, and we feel less cold and alone in spirit (Robles 1983: 11).

Nowhere in the published writings or personal papers left by Guillermina Valdés-Villalva and Francisco Villarreal (both now dead) does concern over *mexicanidad* play a foundational role in their visions for the cooperative. It is clear, however, that all persons involved felt that the cooperative could offer a corrective to a *mexicanidad* that had lost its moral compass in the rising seas of maquiladora manufacturing. But in contrast to the concerns of Bermúdez and Mascareñas over the dilution of national identity through the consumption of American commodities, for Guillermina the concern for protecting *mexicanidad* lay in changing the nature of commodity production in the city.<sup>8</sup> By self-consciously calling themselves *socios*, the cooperative's members not only refashioned themselves as they expressed their control over that which had formerly controlled them; as time went on they styled themselves in contrast to the city's burgeoning maquiladora labor force, whom they regarded as their antithesis—mere workers rather than collective owners of their means of production. Whereas maquiladora workers labored for wages, cooperative members paid themselves. In this manner, too, they fashioned a sense of their contribution not only to their own prosperity but to the prosperity of the nation. A decade later (in 1984) one socio recalled with humor that Socosema *socios* were Mexico's "original recyclers"—indicating the *socios'* views that they had helped lead Mexican society toward an environmentally sustainable future, one "more beneficial for the person and the planet" (in Peña 1997: 235).

<sup>8</sup> Indeed, Guillermina's other notable work in the city consisted of a training center for women workers which, for a time, sponsored a worker-owned sewing factory.

## DUBIOUS DUALISMS

During the years of Socosema's founding and early prosperity, mexicanidad underwent a crisis of identity for many intellectuals, particularly those in Mexico City who worried less about the evaporation of national identity on the dry desert frontier (and who were also slow to take notice of maquiladora manufacturing) and more about its evisceration by an increasingly bankrupt and corrupt ruling regime. In the past, the persistence of "many Mexicos" pointed to a productive dualism that appeared not as modernization gone awry, but as modernization coexisting with an essence of lo mexicano that remained pure and unadulterated (unlike the Ciudad Juárez prostitute).

But by the 1960s, and culminating in the government massacre of hundreds of university students in Mexico City in 1968, dualism became emblematic of fundamental abominations of national politics and economics. In the 1940s and through the early 1960s, mass-market consumer goods had signified industrial development and expanded prosperity (Joseph, Rubenstein, and Zolov 2001; Miller 1998). On the one hand, mass-produced labor-saving consumer goods that enabled clean and sanitary living, imitative of U.S. and European standards, shimmered as icons of a promised modernity for the country's urban and industrial segments. On the other hand, the countryside and its indigenous peasant communities came to serve, for the urbanized and relatively prosperous middle classes, as quaint reservoirs of history, tradition, and culture. They provided the material from which to fashion a synthetic nationalism that drew upon both the modern and the underlying impenetrable, unchanging, and incorruptible "deep" Mexico (Bonfil Batalla 1987).

When ensuing decades failed to usher in prosperity with the generalization of rationalized, scientifically managed, and secular industrial capitalism, the dualism of mexicanidad began to appear flawed. Indeed, the problem of this construction of mexicanidad was that it was not just a fantasy; it was stitched together out of the lives of real people, some of whom were not so much resisting capitalist or gringo "penetration" as trying to eke out a living in the neglected countryside.

In both academic and public intellectual views, by the 1970s the PRI governed in the name of the "revolution" by steadily and slowly eviscerating it. The logic of the Mexican Revolution was to blunt capitalism (particularly gringo capitalism); it was to divert capitalist effects by redistributing national wealth and generating collective equity, and to achieve development—modernization—in a manner that did not sacrifice the nation to

the market. But while the "revolution," with all its symbolic connotations of the primacy of the peasantry and laboring classes, legitimated the regime, its denial secured the sustained rule of the PRI through the persistent subordination of popular opposition (see Cornelius 1975; Montañó 1976; Vélez-Ibáñez 1983; and especially Eckstein 1977). Intellectual observations and academic studies in the 1970s illuminated the breach between revolutionary promise and fulfillment, and revealed that this promise nonetheless was powerful enough to quell unrest and pacify the vast majority of those most disadvantaged by the impoverishment of the revolution. The revolution—the promise of a Mexican modernization—was effectively forever deferred and delayed in a "fiesta of disguises," but never outright denied (cf. Krauze 1998).

Hybridity, which had since the immediate postrevolutionary decades worked to suture together the ill-fitting components of Mexico's national culture and economy, was starting to unravel, according to some intellectuals. Mexico's archetypal hybrids have shifted over time from racial to spatio/temporal: they ranged from the famed racial mixing that spawned the postrevolutionary myth of *mestizaje* to comical, disruptive characters such as the "Naco" and the "Pelado," who beginning in the 1940s populated the literal and imaginative urban fringes by never fully shedding the countryside or the past. To Mexico City intellectuals in the 1970s and 1980s, this latter and later set of hybrids, who trafficked primarily in urban "disorder" (*relajo, desmadre*), represented the by-products of the inevitable dislocation of modernization. These shards, these bits and pieces of social detritus, became national icons through the intellectuals' growing critique of a state that had ossified popular culture into personifications of the misfit between the national character and failed development (see Magazine 2002). Nationalism, in Roger Bartra's view, "invented a Mexican [such as the Naco, the Pelado] who is the very metaphor of permanent underdevelopment, the image of blocked progress" (Bartra 2002: 13).

A tight alliance between state and national elites in charge of the national culture industries ensured that the Pelado and the Naco became comic commentaries of modernity, thereby mitigating their darker, more subversive potential (Bartra 1987). Mexicanidad, in the opinion of younger intellectuals, came not from five centuries of history, as Octavio Paz famously argued in mid-century (Paz 1950), but from the modern effort on the part of elites/state/party to obscure the dislocations of modernization (Fox 1999: 114). And by the end of PRI rule, Mexican dualism no longer appeared to be the magical fusion of two distinct historical moments—the

past and the present—and two different spaces—the urban and the rural. Instead, dualism gave way to images of messy, disordered underdevelopment, littered with what Lomnitz-Adler has called, echoing Brazilian literary critic Beatriz Jaguaribe, “modernist ruins” (Lomnitz-Adler 2001: 212).

From the 1970s through the early 1990s Socosema inserted itself successfully into the doubts about modernity by trafficking as much in images as in the commodity of waste materials. By self-consciously styling themselves as peasant-like producers, Socosema socios accumulated an enormous amount of moral capital, both locally and nationally, which they readily converted into the political capital they needed to continually recapitalize their business. They countervailed elite concerns over consumption in the city by offering up a model for small-scale subsistence production that echoed the principles enshrined in historical rallying cries of the revolution, such as “Tierra y Libertad” (Land and Liberty). That they mined garbage became crucial to this self-construction. Their particular version of Mexican dualism was at the same time both anti-modern (negating the gringo maquiladora system) and very modern (with its emphasis on recycling). They made particularly productive commodified use of the past (after all, garbage *is* a material form of the past) while rejecting the fetishization of commodities for consumption. They willingly *made* commodities, but, unlike other workers in Ciudad Juárez, they did not *become* commodities, thusly nourishing one of the most cherished variations in mexicanidad—the preservation of a soul unsullied by the market.

## WASTING THE PAST, RECYCLING THE FUTURE

*In Mexico we have an excess of modernity, so much so that its weight has become unbearable: national identity in excess, exorbitant nationalism, revolution beyond measure, abuses of institutionality, a surplus of symbolism.... The country is crammed full of modernity, but thirsty for modernization. — Bartra 2002: 13–14*

After the debt crisis of 1982, the state, eager to quench its thirst for modernization (as illuminated in the above passage), turned to the arid deserts of Mexico’s far north. There it fantasized that modernity’s wastes could be sopped up with the sponge of export-processing factories, the maquiladoras, whose insatiable appetite for Mexican labor would finally align modernization with modernity. Not long afterward, in the 1990s, the U.S.

Mexico border burst on the international intellectual radar as the quintessential geographic and cultural setting of postmodernity (cf. Bhabha 1990).

Unsurprisingly, as scholars and intellectuals around the world eagerly quoted border poets (like Gloria Anzaldúa) and admired border artists (like Guillermo Gómez Peña), the border began to appeal as well to Mexican intellectuals. According to border scholar Eduardo Barrera, the national center began to appropriate the border in hopes of learning how to negotiate the slippery boundary between past and future in what was increasingly called the postmodern present. In this way the border and its quintessential occupant—*el fronterizo*—became the emergent hybrid national character (Barrera 1992, 1996; García Canclini 1990). In this way the border morphed from that which had been least Mexican to what has become most Mexican.<sup>9</sup> Endemically hybrid, the border has come to offer models of emergent and divergent *mexicanidades* arrayed along a singular path toward free-market, neoliberal modernization.

This valorization of the border has also shifted the symbolic content of hybridization and mexicanidad; the present mexicano dualism rejects the dyadic past-present formulation embedded in the Pelado and the Naco and at the heart of “deep Mexico.” It celebrates instead the present and the *future*, trading the continued recycling of the past for an official discourse that “is permanently recycling the future” (Barrera 1996: 197). The personification of that future is the migrant, the quintessential transborder subject (Barrera 1992, 1996).<sup>10</sup>

Mexican intellectuals and cultural critics began to see the border as redemptive, and therefore celebrated the same kind of messiness that, less than a decade earlier, they had lamented in the interior. Meanwhile, economic planners and maquiladora developers have eagerly tried to erase or disguise the same features of mixed-up modernization that gave the border such cultural capital in the iconography of postmodernism (cf. Wright 2001). Socosema has foundered on these shoals. Resiliently and stubbornly remaining a throwback to an earlier form of waste management, Socosema

<sup>9</sup> Obviously there still exists in Mexico a great deal of anxiety about the border—and all those associated with it—as the leading edge of assimilation into American culture.

<sup>10</sup> Mexican intellectual interest in the border does not come without certain uncomfortable baggage. Self-consciously styling itself as *fronterizo*, this aesthetic and intellectual movement often seeks to define its understanding of border subjectivity as distinct from—and more accurate than—Chicano versions of the same. See especially Tabuenca Córdova 1995–96; Wright 1997; and Vila 2000.

has struggled against the city government's increasing determination to dispose of them by fully modernizing solid waste disposal.

For years, Socosema's socios had successfully deployed their own dualistic images of themselves. On the one hand, they actively publicized their business and their rational, principled management of it. On the other, however, they trafficked in normative images of scavengers as the unhygienic reservoirs of the failed agrarian past now present in the modern city (cf. Furedy 1984, 1989, 1990; Sicular 1991; DiGregorio 1994). They did so in order to cultivate moral capital among city elites who, with Guillermina Valdés-Villalva's help, reluctantly acknowledged the limits of the maquiladora model. For example, in their effort to win the concession away from Raúl Ibarra, they took out full-page newspaper ads and paraded around downtown with banners declaring that Ibarra's low pay rates were "an injustice that needs to be corrected."

Socosema's success at trading on its alterity—the socios got much mileage out of their cooperative, village-like social arrangements and their labor practices of a bygone era—was impressive in the 1980s, as demonstrated by the cooperative's national and international fame. By making their presence known in the city as "los Señores del Dompe" (the Gentlemen of the Dump),<sup>11</sup> they drew attention to Mexico's perverted transition from a rural agrarian country to an urban industrial one. They served as bold reminders that scavengers exist wherever developing country states fail to extend the promise of prosperity, built from commodity production, to all members of society.

But as the maquiladora model began to solidify and the city mushroomed (to more than a million residents on the eve of the implementation of the North American Free Trade Agreement, or NAFTA, in 1994), Ciudad Juárez elites could no longer stomach the messy presence of scavengers amidst the city's wastes. Battered in the U.S. press over the environmental degradation wrought by maquiladora industrialization along the border (see Hill 2000: chap. 3),<sup>12</sup> Ciudad Juárez factory developers and city officials decided that Socosema brought too much past into the present. By the

<sup>11</sup> The gender politics of the cooperative are another story altogether. But it bears mentioning here that although Socosema's socios insisted that the cooperative—unlike the maquiladoras—did not discriminate between men and women, most references to the cooperative involve mention of the "men" at the dump or the "men" who ran Socosema. Their much-prized gender equity and parity seems just that: prized but not particularly practiced.

<sup>12</sup> Journalists described conditions on the border in terms such as "third world" and "nineteenth century," both of which index the past.

time I began my fieldwork in the fall of 1994, the once-remote garbage dump was limned on three sides by fast-growing working-class settlements. Few of the newcomers in these settlements opted for the cooperative; they elected instead to work in the gleaming, shining icons of the future—the high-tech assembly plants—that had sprouted along new highways radiating to the city's south. The excess of human presence amidst the city's solid waste shamed Ciudad Juárez officials, who longed for a city in the free trade era that would shed the shackles of Mexican attachment to wastes, garbage, and junk.

Unsurprisingly, then, as negotiations for an environmental side accord to the NAFTA took place in the U.S. legislature, the City Sanitation Department drew up plans to close the old "dompe." A new and modern "landfill" opened ten months after the implementation of NAFTA, at a distance of 5 kilometers from the birthplace and physical facilities of Socosema. As part of its own "modernization" of waste management, the Sanitation Department sought to accelerate waste burial with bigger machines, thereby substantially reducing the amount of time that socios had to search and sort the garbage.<sup>13</sup> Privately, senior department officials acknowledged their desire to expel all human beings from the landfill: they envisioned a fully mechanized facility, "without the kind of chaos and disorder you saw at the old dump" (author interview, October 1994).

By this time, Socosema members had lost faith in the ability of Francisco Villarreal, who was elected mayor of Ciudad Juárez on the PAN ticket in 1992, to protect their interests in the face of transnational waste management giant WMI, which was then in control of the concession for solid waste hauling and burial. They were apprehensive about the city's interest in a conveyor-belt materials sorter that WMI had proposed. Membership in the cooperative dropped off precipitously following the closure of the old city dump, and those who remained found themselves threatened by the very alterity they had once proudly cultivated.

Sanitation Department officials regarded the cooperative's hand sorting as an embarrassing vestige of Mexico's failed industrial programs of the past, the kind of recycling that characterized the traditional *mexicanidad*. This recycling, Lomnitz-Adler contends, entails the improvised use of discarded items for other purposes, "plastic bags as plant pots, a broken-down refrigerator as a trunk for storage, and so on" (Lomnitz-Adler 2001: 118). But because this kind of recycling indexes the vast social classes per-

<sup>13</sup> The cooperative's members had often deliberated mechanization, but they ultimately rejected it.

sistently reproduced on the outskirts of modern forms of work, those workers themselves—peasants, domestic servants, and all the “semi-employed”—are precisely the kind of subject least desired by the neoliberal leadership intoxicated on dreams of the maquiladora miracle. Unsurprisingly, in Ciudad Juárez, NAFTA heralded the unraveling of the Socosema.

Eduardo Barrera’s insightful account of the border’s valorization in the 1990s homes in on the state’s ravishing love affair with new technologies (that is, modernity) that will finally be delivered through modernization. He writes, “new technologies are a key feature of the rhetoric of the sublime future as an alternative to political revolution and a stimulus to acquiescence.” This is the contemporary discourse that recycles the future, positioning it always “just around the corner, a corner that is always as far as the carrot on the stick” (Carey 1989: 180; Barrera 1996: 197).

But if the fortunes of Socosema are any indication, the discourse of new technologies has obtained notable material consequences. It has eliminated the excesses of modernity that once created the opportunity for garbage scavengers to build a cooperatively owned business on a foundation of anxiety about the loss of history entailed in modernization. It has eliminated the city’s collective willingness to accept that the past—with hand tools and bodily presence in waste—can convert garbage into commodities. Instead, in the era of free trade, modernization’s triumph of mechanization and rationalization in waste management is seen as the appropriate counterpoint to a city bursting with hundreds of high-technology manufacturing facilities. These visions have absorbed the symbolic and material resources from which the cooperative fashioned its success, such that Socosema does not recycle the future but struggle for it. Socosema’s increasingly dim prospects have emptied the cooperative’s ranks, leaving both former and current members with more and better stories about their recycling history than visions of the coming years.

## POSTSCRIPT: GARBAGE POLITICS

*It’s a dump. Shitty shacks. In five years it’ll be worth a thousand times more.* —Carlos Fuentes 1997: 130

This chapter begins and ends with a series of ironies. Socosema’s fortunes have collapsed in an inverse relationship to the symbolical potency of the material with which its members are most closely associated, garbage.

Paradoxically, however, the present should have been Socosema’s crowning moment, given Robert Stam’s suggestion that garbage stands as “the ideal postmodern and postcolonial metaphor” (1998). Indeed, according to Stam, in the Latin American aesthetic, garbage bespeaks hybridity: it mixes “rich and poor, center and periphery, the industrial and the artisanal, the domestic and the public, the durable and the transient, the organic and the inorganic, the national and the international, the local and the global.” Stam notes that garbage’s metaphoric richness continues to grow in post-modern Latin America.

Sadly, ironically for Socosema socios, garbage’s metaphoric richness lies imprisoned in the limits of its modernist meanings: a symbol of a generic failed modernity. Most poignantly for Socosema, garbage bespeaks not just the universal failures of Mexican modernity but also the cooperative’s own particular failed modernity.

In what is now a final insult to the cooperative, what Lomnitz-Adler called “Mexican recycling” continues to mark modernist failures and the bankruptcy of political promises. Several months before the 2000 presidential election that brought PAN candidate Vicente Fox to power and ended the PRI’s seven-decade ruling monopoly, a light-hearted political satire enjoyed brief popularity in Mexican art movie houses. The film, *Herod’s Law*, unfolds during the presidential term of Miguel Alemán (1946–1952). It follows the fortunes of a hapless, comical garbage dump operator who is plucked from his patronage job to serve as interim mayor in a bestial, remote indigenous municipality, San Juan de los Saguaros. The protagonist comes to town promising “modernity and social justice.” But fearing that his party sponsors will send him back to the dump if he actually delivers on this platform, he quickly abandons any pretense of legitimate governance and turns to happily extorting and shaking down villagers for their few meager pesos. As much to his surprise as the audience’s, he winds up leapfrogging several of his party superiors to become a national congressman. The film concludes with a second visit to the dump, to which our protagonist’s former patron has been sent. This ironic commentary suggests both that, for some, Mexican politics has always been about garbage, and that from the political dregs there will always rise leaders eager to sell out social justice in the past, present, and future.

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