

Cultivating Populism: The Politics of Agroecology in Córdoba, Argentina

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Declaration

This thesis contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in any university. To the best of the author's knowledge, it contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference is made in the text.

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Abstract

While Argentina may be a classic location in studies of populism, agroecologists are far from the traditional imagery of Peronist subjects. Unlike the unionized factory worker of Peronist lore, agroecologists are members of an alternative farming movement which uses the symbiotic relationships between plants to produce chemical free food. Working in Córdoba, Argentina, I sought to understand how agroecologists had become unlikely, yet reliable, members of the Peronist, political coalition. Liberal theories of politics suggest an idealist, immaterial conception of “the political”. This is doubly the case for populism, which is read by liberals as well as by more revolutionary thinkers as purely discursive: the empty promises of a demagogue. Such understandings leave little room for examining the role in political subjectivation played by the plants and agroecological matter with which my interlocutors engaged. Where anthropologists have long argued for the importance of ecologies to shaping “the political” writ large, materialist and environmental anthropology have paid scant attention to populism. Based upon fifteen months ethnographic research with agroecologists, in this thesis I trouble conventional understandings of populism. I suggest that populism is an ideology and that this ideological commitment is fomented through engagement with the material world. In this thesis I suggest a novel approach to understanding populism, as well as engaging in debates concerning the politics of masculinity, embodiment, and environmentalisms.

List of Abbreviations

BIPOC – Black/Indigenous/Person Of Colour

CCT – Conditional Cash Transfer

CONICET – Consejo Nacional de Investigaciones Científicas y Técnicas (National Scientific and Technical Research Council)

CTEP – Confederación de Trabajadores de la Economía Popular (Confederation of Workers of the Popular Economy)

GM – Genetically modified

INTA – Instituto Nacional de Tecnología Agropecuaria (National Institute of Farming Technology)

MCC – Movimiento Campesino de Córdoba (Cordobés Peasants Movement)

MNCI – Movimiento Nacional Campesino Indígena (National Campesino and Indigenous Movement)

MST - Movimento dos Trabalhadores Sem Terra (Landless Workers Movement)

PAN – Partido Autonomista Nacional (National Autonomist Party)

PJ – Partido Justicialista (Justicialist Party; also referred to as the Peronist Party)

SAF – Secretario de Agricultura Familiar (Secretary of Family Agriculture)

SRA – Sociedad Rural Argentina (Argentine Rural Society)

SSC – Salario Social Complementario (Complementary Social Salary)

UCR – Unión Cívica Radical (Radical Civic Union)

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Introduction

Introduction

Huerta Maipú occupied a half hectare lot which had previously operated as a brickworks.¹ It was due to this light-industrial activity that the soil was of such poor quality, or so I was told by the members of the agroecological collective who worked this plot of land in the outskirts of Córdoba, Argentina. The soil was the colour of cedar wood, and would stick together in lumps of clay which the young men of the group threw at one another when they were bored with clearing the weeds. It was, in short, not good soil. This is why Huerta Maipú established a mini factory to make *bio-insumos*, literally bio-inputs. Bio-insumos are a range of non-synthetic products designed to enrich the soil, increasing microbial and fungal life and otherwise improving soil structure. While they are not technically bio-insumos, the factory also was used to produce mixtures which help control pests, such as “apichi”, a combination of garlic, pepper, and chilli, steeped in alcohol, which is sprayed on to plants to deter insects. The use of these bio-insumos, alongside a variety of other methods, constitute the practice of agroecology – an alternative farming movement in which the symbiotic relations that exist within ecologies are harnessed in order to produce food without the use of agro-chemicals.

Huerta Maipú was not only concerned with promoting sustainable farming practices and providing food untainted by potentially harmful agro-chemicals, it also functioned as a means to provide income for the inhabitants of the impoverished, peri-urban municipality who worked the farm. Due to its limited size, the farm was not an economically viable project to support the thirty odd farmers who worked on the plot. Rather, funding was secured largely through the *Salario Social Complementario* (SSC; Complementary Social Salary) a workfare program instituted by Argentina’s federal government. This program intended to supplement the wages of workers excluded from the formal workforce, through financing their participation in community projects. It was administered by social organisations, often with explicit political links, such as, in the case of Huerta Maipú, the CTEP (*Confederación de Trabajadores de la Economía Popular*; Confederation of Workers of the Popular Economy), of which it formed a part, and which in turn was aligned with the left faction of the Peronist Party.

¹ Throughout this thesis I follow the anthropological convention of using pseudonyms for my informants, as well as for organisations where using their actual name would enable easy identification. As such I have used a pseudonym for Huerta Maipú, but have not felt the need to when discussing the far larger Movimiento Campesino de Córdoba. In keeping with this logic of deidentification, I have changed the names of some of the areas in which I worked. The township of Maipú is one such locale.

The interviews I conducted while I worked at Huerta Maipú often turned from structured discussions with specific interlocutors to more wide-ranging conversations, as other members of the agroecological collective heard my questions or my informants' answers and decided that a point needed correction or clarification. In early 2019 I was conducting an interview with Santi, a young worker at Huerta Maipú who had had to put his degree in communications on hold while he looked for employment. Santi let slip that in the previous presidential election cycle, he had volunteered for the successful presidential candidate Mauricio Macri. The confession derailed my previously planned interview, as Santi's co-workers, incredulous, became the ones asking questions. "So basically, you were a Macrista [a supporter of Macri]?", "You voted for Macri?"; "You volunteered for his campaign?" The men grilled Santi. "Can you tell us why?"; "Okay, you voted for him, but what about today, right now, do you still have the same beliefs?" One of the men joked, "You're a Macrista with a welfare card!" The joke being that Macri was the preferred candidate of Argentina's wealthy elites, and that his project of neoliberal austerity had been disastrous for the country's welfare recipients.

"Ah, you voted for him, but you didn't know what was going to happen" interjected one of Santi's friends, supporting him as his elder colleagues grew increasingly combative.

"Of course," replied Santi.

Another colleague, Rey, broke in. "And what were you voting for? What do you think your vote did? Do you think it mattered?"

"No, it didn't matter at all!" Santi replied, to the laughter of everyone gathered. "Neither did yours." In retort, Rey replied that he had voted informally by submitting a blank ballot paper.

"Are you going to vote informally this time?" I asked Rey, in reference to the presidential election that would take place at the end of that year, 2019.

"No," Luis answered for him. "This year we're going to vote Cristina!"

"Sí!" the group of workers, including Santi, called out in affirmation.

The Cristina in question was Cristina Fernández de Kirchner. Fernández de Kirchner was the president of Argentina from 2007 to 2015. She and her now deceased husband, Néstor Kirchner, who was himself president from 2003 to 2007, had governed as part of the "pink tide", a leftward-turn in Latin American politics after decades of neoliberal government in the

region. It was the redistributivist policies of the Kirchners to which my interlocutors pointed in explaining their hope for Fernández de Kirchner's re-election. One of the young men gathered there explained to me, "Cristina might steal, but at least she has love for the people."

Luis' reply was telling and here I will quote it at length:

"The previous government, Cristina Kirchner, I never saw her steal, but everyone says so, they say she robbed. Let's suppose she robbed, let's suppose so. But [under Kirchner] we never had an electricity bill which was four thousand pesos.² You know, there are barrios, there are parts of this country, where it gets to forty degrees centigrade, and the companies cut off the water and they cut off the power. When you are paying a bill that is more than three thousand pesos, and a salary for someone humble (*humilde*), someone like us, isn't even twenty-five thousand pesos, twenty thousand pesos [a month]. For a father of a family like me. I'm not making twenty-five thousand pesos. More than half of my salary goes to gas, power, and taxes. With what remains I can't even afford the basic necessities of food (*la canasta básica*). The current government is not creating sources of work. If they gave me the possibility to work, if I was getting twenty thousand pesos to work in a factory, I would leave this cooperative. Today! I'd abandon [the SSC], everything, I'd be gone. Thirty thousand pesos, who here wouldn't prefer to work? Take me, Luis, put me at the Coca-Cola factory, the factory of Pretty or whatever, any place where they will pay me."

He continued:

"People like us are excluded from society. We really are excluded from society. It might be because of our own mistakes, because we've broken the law in the past. Or it might be that society doesn't accept you, maybe because you wear a cap, or because you have a tattoo, whatever it might be, maybe because you're a drug addict. I don't know. But society excludes us."

Luis summed up his thesis:

² Four thousand pesos was slightly a little over \$100 USD at the time of this interview. Throughout my time in the field ARS fluctuated dramatically. Where I do provide conversions they are based on the date of the interview. I have recorded the conversion to USD rather than AUD both for the ease of international readers, and more importantly, because Argentines themselves assessed the value of their currency and the strength of their economy by keeping track of the rate of conversion from ARS to USD.

“How many ex-presidents of Argentina – who are Argentines, who are our own people – came and emptied out the state, sold everything and stole everything. This is true of the Peronists, they might steal, they take everything, and the Radicals [the Unión Cívica Radical] do the same. The difference with the Peronists is that they give to the people. They steal, but they give to the people.”

A scene such as this one would fit neatly within conventional popular and academic understandings of populism. There is the sense of patronage, as my interlocutors pointed toward the welfare payments and infrastructure investments that characterised the Kirchner-era. There is personalism, as my informants discussed the love that the mononymous Cristina has for the people. There is even the hint of thuggery and crowd intimidation, as elder members of the collective belittle Santi for his previous voting behaviour and insist that this year, everyone gathered will be voting for Cristina. What is relatively unusual about this scene when compared with “just so” stories about populism is its setting: a small-scale farm, where work followed the principles of a new-age, alternative environmental movement. While it might be appealing to bracket this spatial context as little more than an oddity when compared to the sites usually associated with populism, or as further evidence of populism’s inherent flexibility, I suggest that the scene and its setting are inseparable. The agroecological farm, then, becomes an important site of anthropological inquiry for the political subjectivation of Rey, Santi, and Luis.

In this thesis I argue for an anthropological approach to populism that moves beyond focusing on the personalist discourse of leaders, and the access to lines of capital made available to marginalised voters, and instead takes account of the ways in which populism is lived with in a quotidian sense. The approach I develop in this thesis is one that foregrounds the sites in which, and the things through which, populist commitments come about. As such the agroecological farm on which I encountered the Peronist farmers should not fade into the background, but should be fully explored as an input to populist subjectivation. Moreover, at a moment in which activists are attempting to politicise the environment, it is necessary to examine how sites such as the environmentally-concerned Huerta Maipú become crucibles for political subjectivities and action.

That the setting of the interaction I have described above might have a constitutive influence over my interlocutors’ political commitments was underscored for me as I visited other agroecological farms and spoke with other agroecological farmers throughout Córdoba. Not all agroecologists I spoke with were supporters of Kirchnerism or of Peronism, but with very

few exceptions the overwhelming majority expressed populist sentiments. This was true regardless of the class, gender, and racial identities of agroecologists. And while the farmers of Huerta Maipú belonged to the racialised ranks of Argentina's large grey-economy workforce, by no means was this true for all the agroecologists with whom I conducted ethnographic fieldwork. Moreover, these populist commitments were often expressed through pointing to examples of agroecological practice, materials, or discourse. Given that the relationship between populism and agroecology in Argentina does not seem to be an arbitrary one, in this thesis I ask what we learn about populism – and Peronism in particular – by looking at Argentina's agroecologists.

Studying populism

Looking to the relationship between agroecology and populism, I argue, troubles conventional understandings of populism. Within academia populism has been most thoroughly studied by political scientists, in which four main approaches have emerged as means of studying populism: the economic (Dornbousch and Edwards 1991; Sturzenegger 1991; Szusterman 2000); the political strategic (Weyland 2017; Mammone 2009; Madrid 2008); the structural (Oxhorn 1998; Doyle 2011); and the ideational (Hawkins and Kaltwasser 2017; Mudde 2017). Three of these four approaches (the economic, the political strategic, and the structural) largely define populism as a set of policies/strategies for gaining political power based in either a leader's personalism or patronage, or a combination of the two. As I argue throughout this thesis, much of the anthropological work that has sought to understand populism takes its lead from these same analytics of personalism or patronage (Coronil and Skurski 1991; Sánchez 2016; Comaroff 2011; Morris 2013; Michelutti 2013; Jacquemet 2020). Populist leaders often do exhibit an unusually compelling personal charm. Similarly, populist projects regularly entail large scale government intervention in the economy. Throughout this thesis, however, I argue that readings of populism that focus primarily on the machinations of populist leaders as they attempt to secure political power are deeply reductive, as they fail to engage with the rich political lives of populist publics.

It is worth noting too, that where populism is used to describe a redistributivist policy platform, scholars are generally suggesting a lack of substance, or an unsustainability to the populist project's promises. For the main, the term is used to dismiss such projects in the global south (Acemoglu et al. 2013), although followers of United States politics would have seen the 2020 presidential hopefuls Bernie Sanders and Elizabeth Warren both described as populists. The same areas of the globe seen as most susceptible to populist politics are also those areas that have experienced a deliberate under-development imposed upon them first by colonialism and

neo-colonial extractivism and more recently by neoliberal global institutions such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF) – Argentina is a particularly stark example of this (see also Larmer and Fraser 2007).

In criticising the politically conservative fatalism of economic readings of populism I do not mean to exclude economic concerns from the populist politics I will draw out in this thesis. As is clear from Luis' statements that I quoted at length above, my interlocutors were deeply concerned with Argentina's economic policies – and favoured government intervention through job creation programs, welfare, and price controls. As I will demonstrate throughout this thesis, however, the support for state intervention that my informants voiced should be understood less as a call for a politics of patronage, where votes are secured through government handouts, and more as an objection to the exclusion that peri-urban and small-scale rural farmers face in Argentina. It is telling that in the above quoted statements, Luis moved quickly from specifically economic concerns to issues of more wide-ranging social exclusion. Taking Luis' conflation of the end of Kirchner-era welfare policies with a broader social exclusion as a starting point, I suggest that readings of populism that focus on economic redistribution are confusing a means by which populist projects redress structural exclusion with a definition of the populist political project. In doing so, critics both stigmatise pro-poor politics and obscure those moral logics of populism that are not reducible to economic contestations.

Outside Argentina, the moral logics of populism often manifest as racist nationalism. While "right-wing" populisms regularly do voice calls for greater government intervention in the economy (Kalb 2009; Dahlgren 2019) and even for more expansive welfare networks (Shoshan 2016), they are based in and articulated through morally laden ideas of biology, cultural identity, and belonging that exceed economic claims. In studying populist movements I am fortunate that the beliefs of my interlocutors were comparatively close to my own. Indeed, it was my informants who experienced racist exclusion. Relatedly, the nationalism these Argentine populists expressed was a pan-Latin American pride and desire for trade protectionism, rather than a desire to punish immigrants. Cas Mudde and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser (2012) describe the difference between the sort of populism I engaged with, and the more xenophobic variant using the distinction of inclusive and exclusive populism. Broadly speaking, they claim, the former is more present in Latin America while the latter more often describes populism as found mostly in Europe, and, I would add the United States (Gusterson 2017; Hochschild 2016; McIntosh and Mendoza-Denton 2020) and India (Blom Hansen

2001).³ Margaret Canovan (1999) also helps to distinguish these divergent paths of populism, placing the focus on “the people” – populism’s ultimate source of authority. Just who is meant by “the people”, however, is unfixed: while the populists with whom I was familiar might have been promoting a state focused on “ordinary people”, as against a privileged and corrupt elite, Canovan suggests that xenophobic populists’ appeals to the people are really about “*our* people” – often conceived of as an ethnic group supposedly under threat from their state’s lax immigration policies and generous welfare to new citizens.

In my thesis I do not try to find a unifying definition to bring together these divergent political projects. Studies of populism routinely note that it eludes definition. I also do not believe that anthropology offers a particularly strong set of tools for arriving at definitions – the discipline’s strength is in highlighting the variety and contingency of the social world, not attempting to distil essences. If anthropology is ill-suited to developing definitions, it has an almost unique capacity to develop rich social theory out of description, an ability afforded to anthropology by its trademark methodology of long-term, socially embedded ethnographic study. As such instead of a definition of populism, I offer a description – developed through my fieldwork as well as through consulting the literature on populism. I argue that populism entails a majoritarian ideology that functions on a logic of inclusion and exclusion. Exclusion can be experienced in a variety of ways: economic exclusion, cultural exclusion, exclusion from decision making processes. For the populists, their own exclusion is attributable to a minority group of some sort (ethnic, class, or simply political) which exerts disproportionate influence in the polity.

Peronist populism

It is unsurprising that a political ideology aimed at contesting exclusion should flourish in Argentina, given the narrow conception of “*Argentinidad*”, based in ideas white settler colonialism that has long been dominant. While in Chapter One I discuss the evolution of Argentine populism, the preconceptions of populism which exist in the anglophone world necessitate a brief introduction to Peronism here.

Peronism emerged as a political movement in the mid-1940s. The movement takes its name from Juan Domingo Perón, a colonel in the Argentine army who came to prominence following the military coup d’état of 1943. Perón was the labour secretary and later vice-president in the military government before being democratically elected in 1946. In 1946 Perón had presented

³ The rise of Bolsonaro in Brazil potentially troubles the geographical break down Mudde and Kaltwasser describe.

as the presidential candidate for the Labour Party and had been supported by two other minor parties; soon after becoming president he ordered these parties to merge to form the Justicialist Party, which exists to this day and is often referred to as the Peronist Party. The party effectively incorporated Argentina's trade union movement, with which Perón had aligned himself as labour minister. The mid-century Peronist presidencies (1946–1955) instituted aggressively pro-worker policies and consolidated and expanded the previously patch-work welfare system (James 1988; Guy 2009). In line with contemporary populist movements in Mexico, headed by Lázaro Cárdenas, and Brazil, under Getúlio Vargas, Peronism sought to dignify a working class that, up until that point, had enjoyed few industrial protections and had little chance of upward mobility (Rock 1985; Elena 2011). The workers who formed the pillar of Peronist support were a combination of new immigrants from Europe and the Middle East, as well as rural-urban migrants who had made their way from the interior provinces to settle in Buenos Aires. This latter group was largely dark-skinned and faced extreme marginalization by members of the established Porteño middle class, who operated on the long-established belief that Argentina was a white settler colony.⁴

Peronism as a movement has always exceeded its electoral form. Peronists themselves point not to Perón's founding of the party nor even his success in the 1946 presidential elections as the founding moment of Peronism, but rather the mass demonstration of October 17, 1945. On this date, which became known as Loyalty Day, hundreds of thousands of Argentines marched to demand the release of Perón after he had been forced to resign and was incarcerated by rivals within the military government. When the Peronist regime was ended by another military coup in 1955, Perón went into exile and the movement was forced underground. During the intermittent military and civilian governments, Peronist political participation was barred from 1955 until 1973 (Di Tella 1983; James 1988). During this period the movement had fragmented as a revolutionary youth wing on the left and more conservative union leaders on the movement's right vied for dominance. The animosity between the factions came to a head in 1973, when right-wing Peronists opened fire on a left-Peronist crowd which was awaiting Perón's return from exile (Robben 2005). While certainly the apogee of internecine feuding within the movement, the massacre did not mark either the beginning or the end of Peronist factionalism.

⁴ Porteño is the term used to denote people from Buenos Aires, meaning those from the port area. There is a deep and long-standing divide in Argentina between Porteños and the rest of the country – which Porteños refer to as “*el interior*”. This distinction has developed out of the history of national consolidation following the war of independence – during which Buenos Aires maintained its autonomy as a city state distinct from the territories which eventually became Argentina – and the extremely lopsided migration patterns which saw the city's population boom while much of the rest of the country remained sparsely populated.

After another (and to this date, final) period of military dictatorship (1976–1983), Peronism regained the presidency in 1989 under Carlos Menem. Menem ran for the presidency on a conventional Justicialist ticket of pro-poor, pro-union policies. Upon taking power in the midst of a hyper-inflationary crisis, however, Menem instituted a neoliberal agenda, intensifying the pro-market reforms which had been instituted under the dictatorship. During the Menem-era (1989–1999), the Peronist governor of the Patagonian province of Santa Cruz, Néstor Kirchner, began to distinguish himself as a critic of the president's reforms (Mendoza 2018). Kirchner would remain a fairly minor figure on the national stage, however, until he was hand-picked to run against Menem in the 2003 presidential elections by Eduardo Duhalde, the interim president and Buenos Aires-based Peronist powerbroker.

Kirchner's election in 2003 was touted by his faction as a return to traditional Peronism; unsurprisingly, though, Néstor Kirchner did not command the party loyalty that Perón had secured during his mid-century presidencies. Kirchner presented his political project in explicit opposition to the policies of the Menem era. As I noted above, the presidencies of Kirchner and his wife and successor, Cristina Fernández de Kirchner, were marked by expansive government welfare and investments. The Kirchner regimes were also characterised by a progressive social policy agenda as Kirchnerism allied itself with Indigenous groups, social organisations comprised of unemployed and grey-economy workers, and human rights movements. This was in part due to the early weakness of Kirchner's position within the Justicialist Party, and the factional feuding which would continue throughout the Kirchner era.

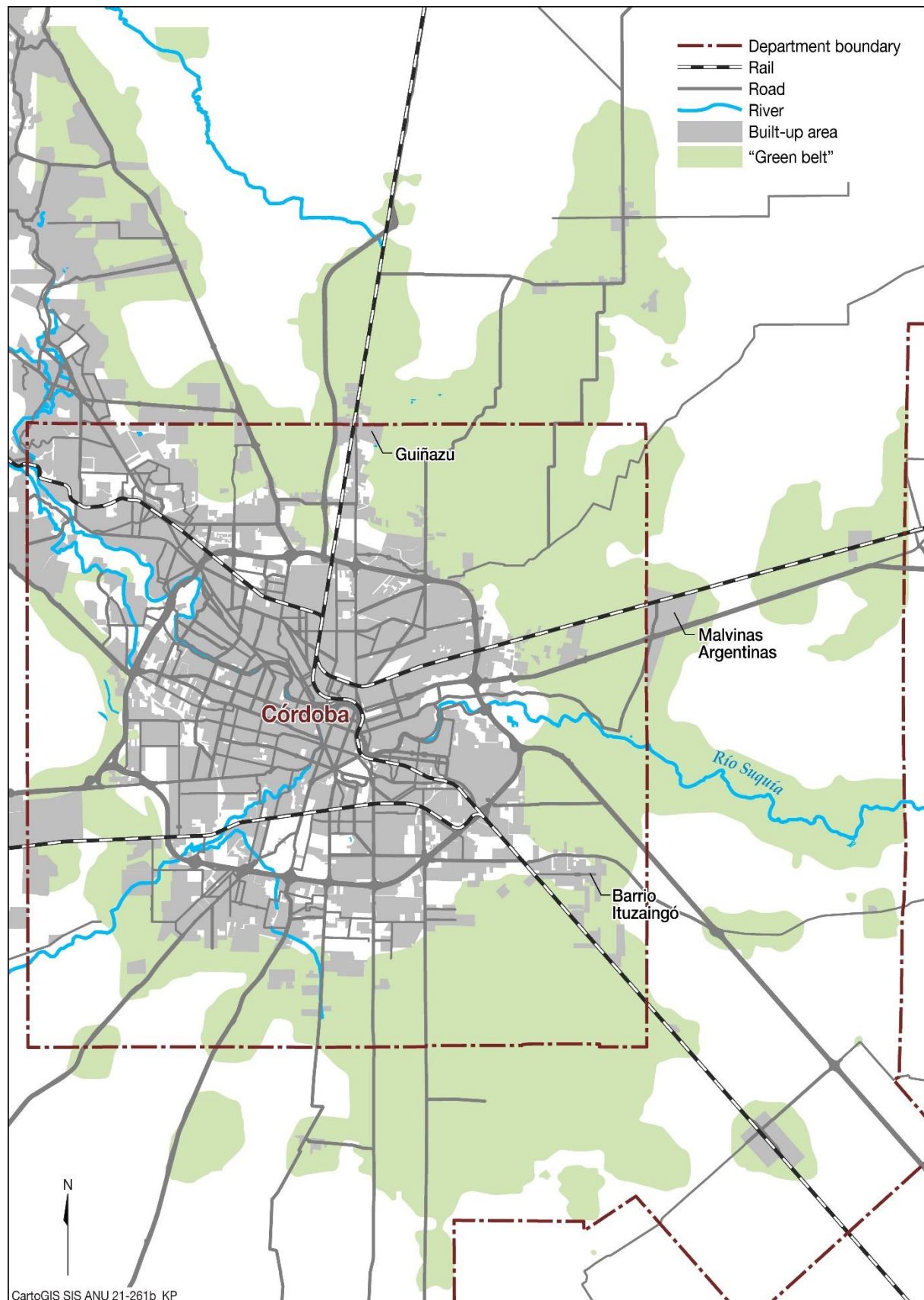
The internal diversity of the Justicialist Party, and how the Kirchners overcame factional resistance by aligning with grass-roots movements, is particularly important when considering Kirchnerism in Córdoba, as I do in this thesis. The Cordobés Justicialist Party is dominated by the right-wing faction and has been intensely critical of Kirchnerism. The animosity between Cordobés Peronism and the Kirchners became particularly personal when in 2008, Fernández de Kirchner attempted to raise export taxes on soy. This sparked a months-long conflict between the federal government and the industrial agricultural lobby. Soy dominates the economy of the province of Córdoba, and the provincial Peronist government distanced itself from Kirchnerism (which was already unpopular in Córdoba) and sided with producers. In this thesis, when I talk about grass-roots support for Peronism within Córdoba, I am referring both to activism that takes place at the municipal level, and, more commonly, to support offered to Peronism at the federal level. Agroecologists in Córdoba were, by in large, very critical of the state of provincial Justicialist politics. I make use of the term "Peronism", rather than the more

specific “Kirchnerism”, as it more appropriately links modern calls for social justice with an imagined prosperous Peronist past.

The field site

As I have started to move from a discussion of populism writ large to the more specific dynamics of how Kirchnerism was interpreted in Córdoba, it is worth a short detour to discuss my field site. The ethnographic data upon which this thesis is based was collected in various locations throughout the province of Córdoba, over the course of fifteen months, from late 2017 to early 2019. While much of my early ethnography was carried out with rural farmers, I eventually came to focus more intently on a small number of peri-urban farming collectives located in the *cinturón verde* (green belt) of Córdoba’s provincial capital, also named Córdoba.

Surrounding the city is the *cinturón verde*. Historically, this green belt was filled in by farming communities which provided the city’s food. The region has gone through significant shifts since the 1980s. Labour precarisation under the military dictatorship at the start of the 1980s and the anti-poor policies of the neoliberal Menem government during the 1990s caused economic pressures which led to poor and working class Cordobés leaving the city for cheaper housing in the peri-urban outskirts (Gutiérrez 2013; Capdevielle 2014). Economic booms in soy, and later in construction, led to the concentration of land ownership in the *cinturón verde* and the gradual diminishment of the agricultural zone. Where the *cinturón verde* once encircled Córdoba, now it is restricted to patches to the south and north-east of the city. I worked on various agroecological farms throughout the *cinturón verde*, but the one I spent the most time on, and where I formed the deepest inter-personal relationships was Huerta Maipú, located in the municipality of Maipú, one of the poorest semi-urbanised parts of the province. Map 1. (below) shows the city of Córdoba, surrounded by the *cinturón verde*.



Map 1: The city of Córdoba, with surrounding cinturón verde

To the south and east of the city are the Pampas. These are the flat super-fertile lowlands which in the early post-colonial period were the site of the extensive grain and cattle farming for which Argentina is famous. This area receives the majority of rainfall in the province. The region is almost entirely devoid of trees. In their place are rows of soy plants, each reaching no more than a few feet in height, their uniformity emphasising the landscapes unchanging flatness. While not the only crop grown in the Pampas, soy has come to dominate the Argentine economy since the late-1990s. Other forms of agriculture and livestock farming have been displaced from the Pampas or abandoned altogether due to the record prices paid for soy on international markets.

In stark contrast to the flat and fertile south-east, the provincial landscape to the west of the capital is marked by the parallel mountain ranges of the Sierras Chicas and Sierras Grandes. Central-European inspired chalets dot the hills of the Sierras Chicas, installed there due to the mountain range's supposed Alpine appearance. A more austere beauty typifies the Sierras Grandes, where the vegetation is limited almost to grasses scattered between the range's dramatic rockfaces. The Sierras extend through from the south to the north of the province. They mark the end of the Pampas and the beginning of the Gran Chaco, which starts at the Sierras' northern end. In Córdoba, the Chaco is an arid region. Despite this it is the area in the province which, until recently, had retained the highest proportion of native forest. Forests in the Cordobés Chaco are dense, made up of short, spiny trees.

The populations of these bioregions are similarly distinct. The fertility of the south-east attracted European, especially Italian, immigrants during the mid to late nineteenth century. Córdoba, even more than most Argentine provinces of the time, was eager to facilitate immigration as a means to populate regions of which Indigenous groups had been recently dispossessed, and to act as a buffer against their return. As a result, south-eastern Córdoba saw the development of a small but prosperous rural middle-class (Solberg 1987). The politics of the south and east has long been, and remains, deeply conservative. The rural middle class that developed there grew wealthy from export agriculture, and has long been suspicious of more progressive governments' pro-worker reforms and the inward looking trade policies that Peronist regimes have promoted. This resistance to popular projects played out dramatically in the 2015 presidential election, with 71.5 percent of Cordobés voters breaking for Macri (Lupu 2016), a vote that my interlocutors suggested was even more overwhelming in the pampean south and east.

In contrast, the north and the west of the province have historically been home to Córdoba's *campesino* populations. These regions of the province are too arid and too rocky to support large scale agriculture. Campesino families have traditionally been involved in small scale livestock rearing – with goats and chickens being particularly prevalent.

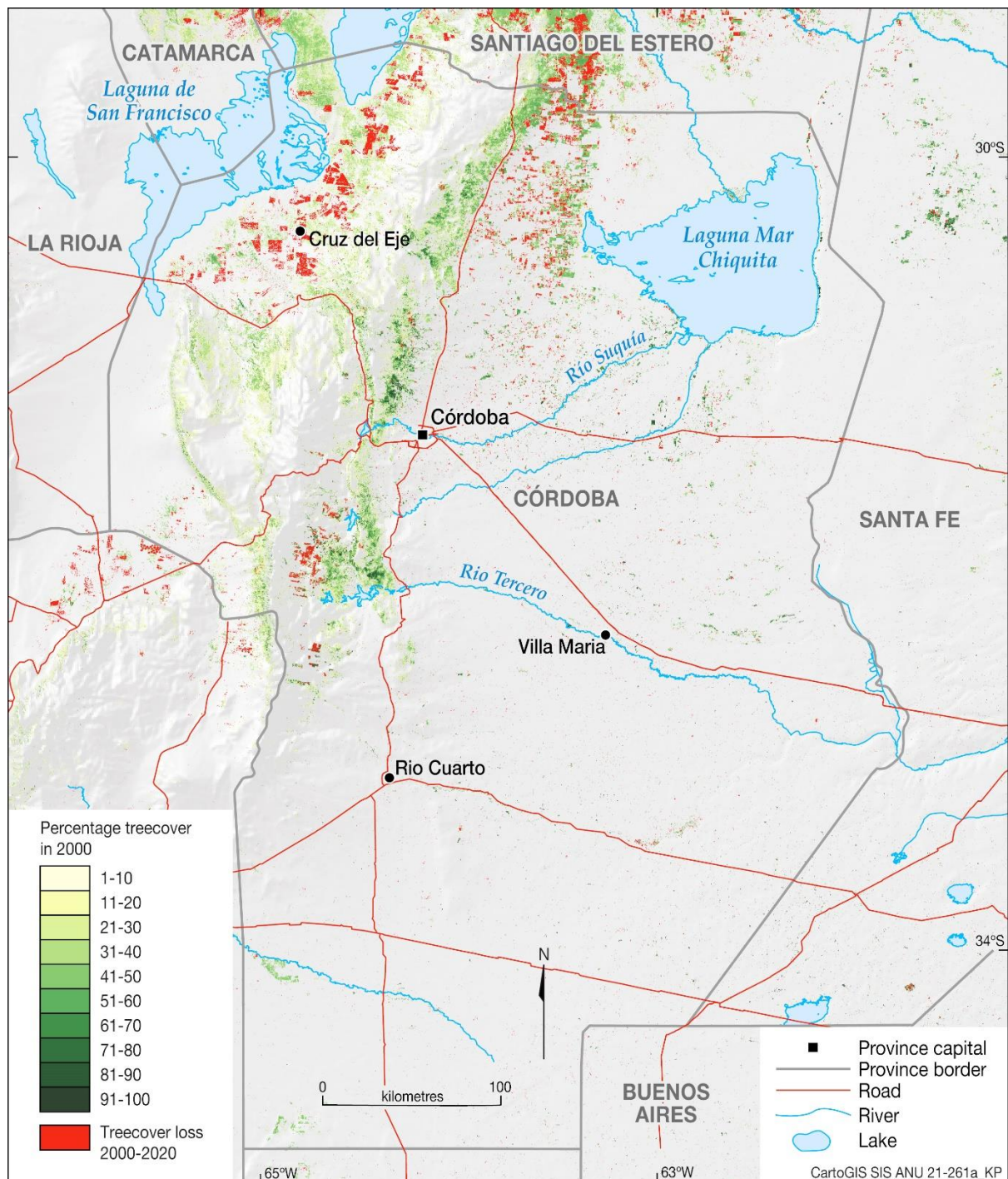
In response to the soy-boom and subsequent north-westerly advance of the agricultural frontier (*la frontera agrícola*), a number of small groups formed in the late 1990s as a means to defend land rights and advocate for campesino interests in Córdoba. By the early 2000s, there were five such groups, which subsequently joined together to form the *Movimiento Campesino de Córdoba* (MCC; Cordobés Campesino Movement). The MCC is itself a member of the national *Movimiento Nacional Campesino Indígena* (MCNI; National Campesino Indigenous Movement), which in turn is a member of the global *Vía Campesina* organisation.

The soy boom precipitated a sharp concentration of land ownership in Argentina. This process was particularly acute in Córdoba, where land under soy monoculture more than tripled from 1.4 million hectares in the 1994–1995 season (the year prior to genetically modified soy's legalisation) to 4.6 million hectares in 2018–2019 (Gobierno de la Provincia de Córdoba 2020). While campesino families lived in areas poorly suited to soy monoculture the advance of soy displaced cattle farming, which could be successfully undertaken in the arid and rugged regions of north-west Córdoba. The changes to Córdoba's physical landscape which accompanied the concentration of land can be appreciated through map 2. In the early twentieth century over seventy percent of the province was still forested, including the pampean south-east (Agost 2015). As shown on map 2., Cordobés native forest is now concentrated in the north and the west of the province. Since the start of the soy boom, deforestation has also been most acute in this region, as campesino families have been displaced by more industrial scale farmers. Between 2000 and 2015, 154,697 hectares of forest were lost in Córdoba (Agost 2017).

Up until the encroachment of cattle farming in the north and west, the land campesino families lived on was of little financial value. The land tenure of campesino families was delicate, often based upon informal agreements or on land usage rights (Article 4015 of the Civil Code of Argentina grants land ownership based upon twenty years of uninterrupted possession and use).⁵ These rights, my interlocutors told me, were difficult to enforce, as provincial officials

⁵ See <http://servicios.infoleg.gob.ar/infolegInternet/anexos/105000-109999/109481/texact.htm>, Section three, title two.

were often willing to prioritise the validity of documented land titles (generally held by better resourced and better politically connected claimants).



Map 2: The province of Córdoba, with topography and forest coverage

My fieldwork in rural Córdoba was largely carried out with MCC organisations, connections which I had made through working at the MCC's storefront in downtown Córdoba capital. As with many campesino movements throughout Latin America, the MCC became increasingly galvanised in opposition to Green Revolution precepts (Hetherington 2020a). And, as noted

by Patrouilleau et al. (2017), as a member organisation of the MCNI, it is one of the most important bodies promoting agroecology throughout Córdoba. The vast majority of my ethnographic data is drawn from working on agroecological farms with campesino producers in the rural north and west, and peri-urban farmers in the cinturón verde.

Race in Argentina

The campesino groups I worked alongside, as well as peri-urban farmers such as those at Huerta Maipú, are both racialised in complex ways. My thesis is certainly not an anthropological exploration of race in Argentina. Racialised logics suffuse Argentine society, however, and are particularly present in the Peronist/anti-Peronist divide which I explore in this thesis. They formed an ever-present backdrop to the data I collected, and as such are crucial to understand as I draw out the dynamics of inclusion and exclusion that I argue are central to populism.

Argentina has often been understood from the outside as a white settler colony. Theorists of race in Argentina, such as Enrique Garguin (2017) and Emanuela Guano (2003) demonstrate that as dominant as this perception is, it has been a carefully crafted one. In recent years a large number of works have been published that foreground the nation's Indigenous peoples (Briones 2002; Gordillo and Hirsch 2003; Schwittay 2003; vom Hau and Wilde 2010; Mathias 2021) as well as Afro-Argentine identities (Karush 2018; Anderson 2015; Geler 2018), thereby contesting the European identity of Argentines.

Increasingly, there is a recognition by Argentines that Argentina is not the white nation many of its citizens have claimed it to be. This monumental transformation in national identity notwithstanding, discussions of racial difference are still often couched in other forms of difference, often related to geography or class (Sutton 2008). The *criollo* is the most striking example of this process. In colonial Spanish America, the term “criollo” denoted those people of Spanish heritage who had been born in the Americas, as opposed to *peninsulares*, Spanish officials brought over from Spain. A clear hierarchy existed between the two, and that criollo discontent with their subordinate position helped fuel the wars of independence which occurred throughout the region in the early 1800s. At this point, criollo was explicitly a European identity, and was contrasted to Indigenous and Afro-Argentine identities, as well as the various identities which the colonial system had taxonomized to name people of mixed ancestry. The wars of conquest against the Indigenous people of Argentina occurred during a phase of liberal government in which the country's Spanish heritage no longer had the cachet it enjoyed throughout the independence era. The Indigenous people displaced at the end of these wars

were largely expected to integrate into a *criollo* or *campesino* identity. While in other parts of Latin America, the mixture of settler and indigenous populations became known as *mestizo* populations, Argentina refused an explicit acknowledgement of racial *mestizaje*. By the end of the nineteenth century, the term “*criollo*” (and to a lesser extent “*campesino*”) served as a means to denote rural, dark-skinned populations without surrendering the lie that Argentina was a homogenously European population. Toward the end of the liberal period there were attempts, largely by groups promoting a conservative Catholicism, to reform the *criollo* identity as something of higher value. While such groups acknowledged an Indigenous contribution to the *criollo* identity, they did so while maintaining that the *criollo* was something of a local variant of an international Latin (and thereby European) race.

The subaltern racial alterity of *criollo* identities was further cemented in the Argentine imaginary as large numbers of rural people migrated to Buenos Aires from the 1930s through to the 1950s. That these dark-skinned Argentines overwhelmingly lent their political support to Perón, who was viewed as both crude and autocratic by the established *Porteño* middle class, which only sharpened the distinction between *criollos* and Argentines of European heritage (Guano 2003; Garguin 2007; Milanesio 2010). A racialised lexicon was developed to name the dark-skinned newly urban population. During the Perón era anti-Peronists labelled these groups “*cabecitas negras*” (little blackheads), and increasingly they became referred to as “*negros*” (blacks) or the more offensive “*negros de mierda*” (fucking blacks). Despite the fact that such terms seem explicitly racial and have definitely developed as a means to name what in the anglosphere are thought of as markers of racial difference (phenotype, heritage), Argentines who use these terms report that they name class, rather than racial distinctions. There is some truth to this, as white skin does not preclude someone from being referred to as negro, but as class and race track persistently together in Argentina the terms “*criollo*”, “*cabecita negra*”, and “*negro*” all point to racial distinctions and forms of privilege while occluding explicit discussions of race.

People against whom these terms are applied have a similarly ambiguous relationship with the place of race in their identities. As with *cabecita negra* and *negro*, *campesino* identity blends the economic with the racial. The term “*campesino*” translates literally to the English “peasant”. In most parts of Latin America, the term does not carry the same pejorative implications as its English counterpart, but again, Argentina bucks the trend. Until recently the term “*campesino*” was rarely used by small-scale rural farmers, who preferred to be called *criollos*. As a result of the *campesino* movements that have organised rural communities throughout Argentina, the term has become one actively adopted by many small producers, especially those who are

active in community politics. Contemporaneous to the growth of campesino organisations was the emergence during the 1990s of Indigenous rights groups. While I will discuss these groups in more detail in the following chapter it is worth noting that a vocal minority of campesino organisers explicitly stated that campesinos were, if not Indigenous, at the very least deeply influenced by an Indigenous heritage. More commonly, however, “campesino” names an occupation while implying a (non-European) criollo heritage. Likewise, while my peri-urban informants would not describe themselves as Indigenous, they did conceptualise the exclusion they faced as entailing a racial component, and actively disputed the idea of Argentina as being made up of a European population.

That members of the MCC as well as the farmers of Huerta Maipú experienced a racist exclusion matters as I theorise agroecology’s relationship to populism. Collectively, campesino groups and social organisations represent the vast majority of agroecological producers in Córdoba. Agroecological practice as it has developed throughout Latin America is attuned to the overlapping of economic marginalisation, racial discrimination, and geographically based exposure to toxic threat.

Agroecology

Agroecology has had to be adapted in order to meet the challenges faced by joint economic and ecological crisis common throughout Latin America. In its most stripped-back definition agroecology entails a form of food production in which the symbiotic relations that exist within an ecology are utilised so as to avoid the use of agro-chemical inputs. This is far from an exhaustive definition of what agroecology has come to mean, either globally or in Argentina. Here I will briefly discuss the history of agroecology before discussing the various meanings of agroecology as they exist today.

Agroecology can be dated to the late 1920s when an inter-disciplinary research agenda between agronomists and ecologists came into vogue. The term “agroecology” was coined by the Russian agronomist, B.M. Bensin, although in the United States the preferred term was “crop ecology,” this was the same project of applying ecological science to manage food production (Wezel et. al. 2009; Gliessman 1998). Contemporaneous with this scientific agroecology, a more romantic, neo-vitalist farming movement of biodynamic agriculture was being developed by Rudolf Steiner and his followers, in part, as a reaction against the growing commercialisation of synthetic nitrogen fertiliser (Paull 2011). Although the first iteration of agroecology was based in inter-disciplinary natural science, modern agroecology owes as much to Steiner’s vitalism as it does to early ecological agronomy. Not all agroecologists

practise biodynamic farming – although most of those with whom I worked did use at least some biodynamic methods – nonetheless, a commitment to seeing the environmental world as animated by vital forces is fundamental to modern agroecological belief as it exists in Córdoba.

The resurgence of interest in agroecology from the 1970s was not a return to the dry, scientism of crop ecology but rather a more outward looking movement. This was a more politically engaged agroecology, influenced by the anti-Green Revolution environmentalist movements of the 1960s, but also by critical peasant studies (Wezel et. al. 2009; Sevilla Guzmán and Woodgate 2013). In Latin America, the resurgence of agroecology coincided with a growing political mobilisation of campesino and Indigenous groups. Throughout the 1980s campesino and Indigenous groups held international conferences across Latin America with a focus on agrarian reform (Sevilla Guzmán 2015). By the end of the decade, agronomists disillusioned with industrial agriculture had joined these movements, and were promoting agroecological methods. In Argentina, the 1990s saw a sharp concentration of wealth and land, caused by the neoliberal policies of President Carlos Menem. The decade ended with economic crisis. Agroecology was adopted by social organisations made up of Argentines who had borne the brunt of the millennial economic crisis and, as occurred throughout Latin America in the 2000s, agroecology became linked with leftist politics (Patrouilleau et. al. 2017; Sevilla Guzmán 2015). In Argentina and across Latin America, the links between leftist social organisations and agroecology have remained strong. Some of my informants suggested that just labour practices were a defining feature of agroecology, others noted that through agroecology small-scale farmers could avoid becoming entrapped in cycles of debt associated with the costly chemical inputs of conventional farming. The anthropologist David Meek (2014) suggests that agroecology functions as part of the moral economy of movements such as Brazil's *Movimento dos Trabalhadores Sem Terra* (MST; Landless Workers' Movement), enabling them to frame ideological labour demands within a language of sustainable land management. In Argentina, as I discuss at length in Chapters Two and Three, agroecology has become linked with movements challenging the distribution of industrial-agricultural pollution in marginalised communities.

A further key precept of agroecology is that its practice should be adapted to local contexts (cf. Khadse et. al. 2018). Tellingly, agroecology presents an almost exact opposite to the mode of farming described by Andrew Ofstehage (2018) in his study of soy production in Brazil. Examining a section of the same Southern Cone soy boom that forms the backdrop to this thesis, Ofstehage describes how a “flexible farming” is developed, and is reliant upon crops that

have been disembedded from the social and geographical conditions in which they are farmed. By contrast, agroecology entails promoting the use and cultivation of native plants over foreign varieties, as well as a celebration of a reified vision of local “traditional” culture. Across Latin America, boosters of agroecology have been eager to characterise agroecology as a hybrid of Indigenous and western agro-technical practices (Alimonda 2006; Sevilla Guzmán 2015; Altieri and Toledo 2011). During my fieldwork suggestions that agroecology had emerged from Indigenous agricultural practice were constant, and agroecologists commonly positioned themselves as working to protect or recover “*saberes ancestrales*” (ancestral knowledges). Agronomists in Central America were early adopters of agroecology, and the academic curricula there have been developed in conversation with ethnobotany and campesino farming practices (Francis et. al. 2003). Moreover, Indigenous and campesino groups have been at the forefront of the alternative agricultural movement across Latin America, as since the early 2000s such groups have increasingly turned against the modernisation promised by the Green Revolution (Hetherington 2020a). To view agroecology as Indigenous practice, however, elides the central role that agronomists, often state financed, have played in the movement’s development in Argentina and throughout Latin America (Patrouilleau et. al. 2017; Cockburn 2014; Cockburn 2015). As Gonzales et al. write: “It is important not to confuse agroecology with indigenous agricultures. These two ways of doing agriculture are closer to each other on a number of key aspects than to conventional agriculture. However, one is embedded within the realm of holistic Western science while the other is not. In other words, there are fundamental epistemological, ontological, and cosmological/spiritual differences” (2010, 172). This caution notwithstanding, agroecology is viewed emically by many practitioners in Argentina as a return to the agricultural practices of Indigenous Americans.

Sharpening the contrast between agroecology and the “flexible farming” of the soy boom is the extent to which agroecology is reliant upon and recognises multi-species entanglements. All agriculture, of course, entails multi-species relationships, even if the rich webs of ecologies have been simplified through the extermination of non-commodifiable life-forms, as is the goal of monocrop farming. What distinguishes agroecology from other forms of farming is the diffusion of agency that agroecologists themselves understand as occurring in their farming. Agroecologists conceptualise themselves as being in partnership with a swathe of non-human forces. Plants, of course, but also soils, insects, fungi, and other microbial life are intently focused upon as part of the farming process. Practitioners who engage in biodynamic farming, which most of the agroecologists I spoke with did to a greater or lesser extent, adopt an even broader vision with regard to the factors that influence production. Various celestial bodies,

cosmological spirits, and Andean deities, as well as ill-defined forces such as “light,” are also accounted for by biodynamic farmers.

An agroecological approach to farming entails practices of noticing that are obscured by more conventional agricultural methods. I return to a discussion of the politics of noticing in the conclusion of this thesis. Here it is sufficient to say that agroecologists in Córdoba are committed to demystifying food production. On the one hand, agroecologists do this through showing the labour which goes into producing agricultural products and explicitly stating the toxic dangers associated with the conventional agricultural export model. On the other, demystification for agroecologists entails moving beyond the human labour of farming to highlight the role played by the more-than-human in food production.

What can agroecology offer studies of populism?

How does the demystification of farming, and the acknowledgement of the more-than-human, shed light on the workings of populism? Agroecology in Argentina brings together the history of Peronist political action, a set of practitioners who have long experienced economic and racial marginalisation, and protests against a de-industrialised economy geared toward foreign exports. Versions of these issues occur in many discussions of populism. The acts of demystification which I discuss above, however, also encourage us to take the material and ecological factors of this puzzle seriously, and in this thesis I apply the analytics of materialist and environmental anthropology to understand populism.

Although in this thesis I am dedicated to highlighting the place of material things, and plants in particular, in political configurations, I explore this topic only to the extent it is relevant to human sociality. Similar to Julie Soleil Archambault (2016), I draw upon multi-species anthropology while still maintaining an anthropocentric analysis. Centring the human does not mean reinscribing flawed dichotomies of culture/nature nor accepting the human as somehow singularly bounded off from the world in which she lives. A commitment to anthropocentric analysis emerges from my empirical data, on the one hand, and from a personal belief in the incommensurability of human life, on the other. Again, in line with Archambault, my interlocutors were not interested in “trying to see the world from a plant’s-eye view” (2016, 248). They certainly took great care in ensuring plants had optimal growing conditions and they were concerned with plant biodiversity as a value in its own right, independent of the benefits biodiversity brought to their farms.⁶ The health of the plants, however, was pursued

⁶ Questions of value are not central to this thesis. The approach I take to ideology, in which I foreground its evaluative functioning, does necessitate that I clarify what I mean by value, however. In this thesis I treat value as

as a means to ensure their own health and the economic viability of their worker cooperatives in conditions of environmental pollution and neoliberal austerity. Likewise, the biodiversity they valued was narrated in opposition to a model of development based upon agricultural and mineral extractivism that excluded them from its economic benefits, while regularly leaving them, or marginalised people like them, to bear the ecological externalities. In short, while politics is certainly a multi-species affair, the political commitments of my interlocutors had people at their ethical centre, as do my own.

This position puts me somewhat at odds with much of the recent post-humanist literature. Notably it represents a break with Kristina Lyons (2020) study of agroecology in Colombia, in which the author argues for an ontological troubling of “life” through examining the ambiguous vitality of soil. There are, however, resonances between Lyons’ work and my own. In particular her suggestion that agroecology entails cultivating, and being cultivated by, a relationship of noticing with ecologies, lucidly describes the dynamics I observed as well. Lyons and I diverge with regard to our conceptualisations of politics. In contrast to the politics of my informants discussed above, Lyons notes her that interlocutors’ practices “obliged me to depart from a biopolitical register that starkly distinguishes between life and death and the wellbeing of human life and the lives of other beings and things” (2020, 130). Lyons suggests that agroecology offers a means to imagine alternative, rather than oppositional, politics.⁷ The suggestion that anthropology’s contribution to “the political” should entail an engagement with describing alternative possibilities for how the world might be is central to the ontological turn, which has had great influence among post-humanist, environmental anthropology (De la Cadena 2010; Kohn 2013; Kirksey 2015; Chao 2018). In their critique of the ontological turn, Lucas Bessire and David Bond write of this approach: “To be radical, contra Marx, is not to grasp the thing by the root but to tend to a different plant altogether” (2014, 441). Rather than adopt this understanding of the political, I maintain throughout this thesis a focus on

an ethnographic category, rather than an analytic one. Jessica Cattelino argues that “Valuation is an intrinsically social process ...[I] analyze value as the significance of actions in relation to social totalities” (2008, 209). Joel Robbins (2015) takes the notion that value motivates action as axiomatic, but suggests that in a world of constantly competing values, specific values are realised only in rare examples which stabilise their societal importance. To make this case Robbins points to rituals as typifying such moments of values being exemplified and stabilised. My engagement with value as an ethnographic category mostly occurs as I explore how material objects are involved in processes of political subjectivation. As demonstrated by anthropologists who draw upon Peircean semiotic theory, processes of value generation occur not just in Robbin’s rituals, but through everyday engagements with material things, as overarching systems of value are pieced together (Munn 1992; Weiss 2016; Keane 2018). As such in this thesis when I make reference to “values” I am taking about those social norms which guide individuals’ action as well as their assessments of actions and events. Values are never *sui generis* individual but are intersubjective and formed through embodied engagements with the world.

⁷ Agroecology does indeed offer meaningful, decolonial praxis, as Latin American practitioners come to rethink colonial era value systems which have celebrating anything European as superior to anything indigenous to the Americas. More broadly, however, the approach to politics Lyons suggests could be viewed as a post-humanist interpretation of Jacques Rancière’s (1999) narrow definition of politics as a disordering of ordered bodies accompanied by an egalitarian imperative.

ethnographic questions of exclusion, human vulnerability, and resistance – the same political analytics that my informants made use of as they engaged in agroecological practice.

What is meant by “the political” matters, because, as I show in this thesis, an environmental anthropology attuned to the non-human has the potential to offer great insights into modern political conflicts. In particular, it is capable of looking past the hypocrisy of liberalism as it approaches populism. Conventional understandings of politics, which draw upon a western liberal tradition, depict “the political” as a realm of competing ideas that transcends the physical (Braun and Whatmore 2010). Bruno Latour mocks such understandings, characterising the immaterial conception of “the political” as imagined as: “empty arenas where naked people were supposed to assemble to talk” (2005a, 7). Kregg Hetherington (2020a) notes that a belief in human transcendence has been amplified in the wake of World War II, as political philosophers distancing themselves from the eugenics of fascism have been keen to singularise human life against other forms of *bios*. Environmental anthropology has long argued against liberal, immaterialist understandings of politics, and in favour of ecologies’ roles in shaping “the political” writ large (Wolf 1972; Mintz 1985; Friedmann and McMichael 1989; Kosek 2006; Hetherington 2020b). Environmental as well as materialist anthropology have had almost nothing to say, however, in countering idealist approaches to populism. For the most part, anthropology has been willing to accept depictions of populism as mere rhetoric, a position that is inattentive to the role played by material and environmental factors in configuring populist politics. Notable exceptions to this tendency include Kari Dahlgren’s (2019) engagement with right-wing populism in Australian mining communities and Ana Carolina Balthazar’s (2017) discussion of the domestic materiality of “Brexit”.

In order to highlight the failings of conventional approaches to populism, and to argue for a rethinking of the concept, I draw upon environmental anthropology, as well as the materialist approaches which since the 1990s have sought to foreground how the social world is made through the presence of material objects. I show the way in which populist beliefs are engaged with, made, and utilised on a quotidian basis. These moments occur as subjects have embodied encounters with material objects that have been invested with political meaning (cf. Navaro-Yashin 2012; Hull 2012; Ralph 2013). If anthropology does not attend to the ways in which populism results from everyday engagements with matter, it is blind to an important component of processes of political subjectivation. Worse still, it risks reproducing a liberal depiction of populism as rhetoric, a characterisation that I show is replete with racist, classist, exclusionary beliefs.

Structure

In order to rethink populism, giving due attention to populists' embodied, quotidian engagements with physical, and in particular ecological, matter, I have divided my thesis into five chapters.

In Chapter One I examine the way in which political affiliations have developed in Argentina, with a particular focus on rural political issues. In exploring the way political alignments have come about, I counter the idea that populism should be understood as primarily personalist. I show, instead, the degree to which populist coalitions are put together through pre-existing social and intellectual movements. I draw heavily on Ernesto Laclau's (2005) theory of populist political mobilisation in order to explore the similarities and differences between traditional Peronism and Kirchnerism. While constructing a shared identity for the populist coalition was a particular concern for mid-century Peronism, I argue that the Kirchnerist populist coalition leaned in to the heterogenous identities of which it was composed. This, I argue, is the result of international, epochal shifts related to the way in which governments secure legitimacy, but also due to more immediate concerns caused by the relative weakness of Néstor Kirchner's position within the Peronist Party when he first took the office of president. The similarities and the differences that exist between the regime of Perón and the Kirchner governments belie understandings of populism as autocratic and instead point towards populist movements as made up of contingent groupings in which demands are made from the bottom up as well as from the top down.

In Chapter Two I focus more explicitly on agroecology, and analyse how my interlocutors' theorisation of environmental harm speaks to ideas about where the political should be located. When I introduce agroecological social organisations in Chapter One, I do so in the context of the Kirchners' horizontalist turn – a move away from Peronism's traditional reliance upon a vertical power structure and a partial break with organised labour. Were I to follow the environmentality literature (cf. Agrawal 2005; Luke 1999; Li 2007; West 2006), the proliferation of agroecology during the Kirchner-era would be evidence of a top-down strategy of governance through environmental dispositions cultivated by the state. Instead, I focus on the local context through which agroecology has come to prominence. In place of agroecology as an external mode of governance shaping the environmental subjectivities of my informants, I show the ways in which an indigenous environmental, health, and economic justice movement has taken up agroecology – adopting the language to suit pre-existing demands. The chapter also discusses the intense political and cultural divide that exists within Argentina. I use the literature on conspiracy theorisation, where conspiracy acts as both a descriptor of Argentine

political culture, and offers an analytic to understand how and where my interlocutors conceptualise politics as taking place.

I use Chapters Three and Four to jointly draw out the liberal double-bind regarding populist politics. On the one hand, for liberals, populism is too ephemeral, while on the other, it is too concrete.

By highlighting the role of agroecology in fomenting populist commitments, I use Chapter Three as an opportunity to problematise the critique that populism is nothing but discourse. It is common for theorists to point to populism as a set of empty promises delivered by a central leader to an easily duped public (Weyland 2017; Comaroff 2011; Sánchez 2016; Giusto 2020). In this chapter, I look to the way my informants engage with populism in a lived, quotidian sense through the things of populism. I make the case that populism should be understood as an ideological commitment, and in doing so I make an argument about how anthropology should conceptualise ideologies. I draw upon science and technology studies (STS) and materialist anthropology to identify the material things that help to foment a commitment to an ideology of populism. More specifically, I show how the meanings that are imbued within agroecological materials – as well as the meanings attributed to conventional agriculture – affect practitioners, and help to instil populist commitments. I find Peircean semiotics useful in thinking through the social process by which agroecological matter and populist commitments are linked, in particular the triad of quality-qualia-qualisign. Far from being mere discourse, then, populism is made out of people's everyday engagement with material things.

In Chapter Four I follow my interlocutors from the agroecological farm to a Peronist protest march. I use this event, and the way scenes like it have been interpreted in both popular and academic literature, to discuss the second element in the liberal double-bind I describe. This is the suggestion that populism is too embodied – that due to an emotional excess the mass movements characteristic of populism are somehow illegitimate. Again, I draw upon Ernesto Laclau's (2005) work to position such arguments within an intellectual genealogy based in late nineteenth century crowd theory. I track the influence that this regressive body of work has had in the development of the social sciences and show how aspects of it are drawn upon in anthropological analyses of populism, especially those which decry the emotional excess populist crowds supposedly generate. That the racist, anti-popular language of crowd theory is replicated so clearly in contemporary Argentine liberals' discussions of Peronism makes the application of an anthropological analysis inspired by crowd theory especially troubling. I engage throughout this chapter with Sian Lazar's (2015) call for a symbolic analysis of protest.

I undertake this symbolic analysis by turning again to Peircean semiotics, and in particular the way it has been built upon by Gal and Irvine (2019). In line with Lazar's suggestion that marches be read as an "interplay between demonstrator-performer and audience-interpreter" (2015, 250) I explore the dynamics of Peronist bodies as qualisigns for both populist and anti-populist movements.

In Chapter Five I discuss the world that a back-and-forth of populist and neoliberal government have created for the people with whom I worked. Until this point I discuss the desire my informants held for a return to populist government, but here I explore the situation of these workers in a post-populist, neoliberal Argentina. I examine the Salario Social Complementario, a conditional cash transfer (CCT) paid to informal workers within social organizations, ostensibly for community development projects. CCTs such as this one emerged during Peronist rule, and were heavily relied upon during the Kirchner years. As a workfare program, however, the SSC also has a distinctly neoliberal influence, and I argue that the work undertaken on the agroecological farm helps to buttress the neoliberal state's withdrawal of services. In this chapter I draw upon Lauren Berlant's *"Cruel Optimism"* (2011) to develop the figure of the "pyrrhic national". Rather than accept conventional approaches to the relationship between masculinity and the nation-state, which treat the connection as one of *a priori* masculine privilege, I use this figure to demonstrate that materialising ostensibly valorised identities can be harmful to subjects within the context of neoliberal austerity.

The anthropologist Jean Pierre Olivier de Sardan (2015) suggests that anthropologists have long been latent populists, at least methodologically speaking. By this he means that anthropologists by and large share with populist projects a commitment to elevating the voices of those traditionally excluded from decision making. The supporters of populism are rarely afforded respect within academic works. Sometimes their commitments are sympathetically explained away as the result of unfair processes of globalisation (Kalb 2009; Hochschild 2016). Other times they are depicted as worked up by the persuasive power of a demagogue (Sánchez 2016; Comaroff 2011). Instead of taking my lead from these approaches, I follow historian E.P. Thompson (1966) in foregrounding the agency of people whose agency is frequently denied. I also draw extensively throughout this thesis on the works of the post-liberal philosopher Iris Marion Young (1983; 1990; 2000), whose focus on participation and inclusion lends itself well to the description of populism I put forward: a majoritarian ideology functioning on a dynamic of exclusion and inclusion. Rather than explain away populist commitments I argue for an anthropology that places them on a level playing field with other ideological

systems, and seeks to understand how they are made, and how they are lived with by the populists themselves.

Chapter One

Populist Coalition Building in the Argentine Interior

Introduction

I met Héctor at a day-long workshop run by *Instituto Nacional de Tecnología Agropecuaria* (INTA; National Institute of Farming Technology) on an agroecological vineyard some forty kilometres north of Córdoba capital. We had spent the morning making bokashi and super-magro, two of the most popular natural fertilisers used by agroecological farmers. Héctor was a man in his mid-twenties who was attending the meeting with a university friend, hoping to learn some skills which could be applied to the small property he had purchased in Dean Funes, an area in the arid north of provincial Córdoba. The pair explained that they had become interested in agroecology during their participation in the anti-Monsanto protests that took place in Malvinas Argentinas from 2012 to 2015. Describing my research interest and the work I had been doing with the *Movimiento Campesino de Córdoba*, I was taken aback when Héctor's reaction was a strong rebuke of the organisation. Héctor criticised the MCC, suggesting that during the Kirchner era (2003–2015) the organisation had ceded its institutional autonomy for access to government grants, and that the movement remained too close to Peronism, which he described as "*La cara más cruel del capitalismo y modernismo*" (The cruellest face of capitalism and modernism).

I was surprised by this criticism, not so much because I disagreed, but because it was so distinct from the thinking of most agroecologists. Although Héctor was overstating the matter, it is true that the MCC has become part of the Kirchnerist coalition. Similarly, I too viewed the modernist policies and ideology of Peronism as at intellectual odds with many of the precepts of agroecology. The first Peronist regime (1946–1955) had promised a developmental project based squarely in material wellbeing, increased consumption, and national industrialisation (cf. James 1988; Elena 2011; Torre and Pastoriza 2014; Lazar 2017). Perón himself had been the secretary of labour, and accounts of his rise conventionally point to the central role played by the union movement. The Kirchners, who had styled themselves as the modern heirs of Perón, similarly followed an explicitly developmentalist approach, in no small part funded by the environmentally disastrous soy boom (Richardson 2009). The investment of Monsanto in Malvinas Argentinas, which galvanized Héctor and so many agroecologists like him, was announced by Cristina Fernández de Kirchner herself. The conventional image of the Peronist subject seemed a far cry from the new-age, alternative farmers who surrounded me on the vineyard.

And yet, the agroecologists of Córdoba, with very few exceptions, were supporters of the Peronist Party or held Peronist ideological commitments. The MCC – which had become the largest organisation promoting agroecology in the province – had organised campaigns for the Peronist presidential candidate in 2015, including a number of municipal Kirchner-aligned council members within its ranks, and had been a foundational member during the incorporation of the Kirchnerist electoral list in Córdoba.⁸ Similarly, in Maipú, which neighboured Malvinas Argentinas, the agroecological collective with which I extensively worked would regularly form a contingent in pro-Peronist marches, and was a part of a larger organisation (CTEP) which would be the vanguard pressuring the Peronist Party to nominate Cristina Fernández de Kirchner for the 2019 presidential election.

I take this seeming contradiction – that a new-age environmentalist movement should have been so closely linked to Peronism, an explicitly modernist, statist movement associated predominantly with trade-unionism and industrialization – as a foundational problem for this chapter. Providing *the* answer to, “Why agroecologists support Peronism?” is beyond the scope of this chapter, as seeking to understand the link between agroecology and Argentine populism will motivate much of this thesis. In this chapter, I instead aim to draw out this seeming contradiction through historical overview. Paying particular attention to agrarian policies and rural peoples – something of an understudied topic in discussions of Argentine populism (Palacio 2019) – in this chapter I explore how political coalitions have been pieced together in Argentina in support of populist candidates.

This chapter, then, serves as a historical primer on the modern configuration of land, populations, and political commitments; it also serves to make a claim about how populist movements are galvanised. As Argentina has lacked any significant land-reform project, the current configuration of land ownership has its roots in the process of national consolidation, a project dating to the second half of the nineteenth century. This chapter will begin in this period, describing the relationship between ideas of national modernisation, land, and populations. I then discuss the early twentieth century reaction against changes to the perceived national identity that mass European migration represented. This Hispanicist

⁸ In contrast with the supposed centralized power of the populist leader, the politics of the Peronist party have been deeply fragmented since the Menem era, a fragmentation which only sharpened throughout the Kirchner years. As a result, various different electoral lists regularly compete against one another under the banner of Peronism. Such was the case with the Kirchners supporting electoral lists under myriad names during their tenure, most famously *Frente para la Victoria*, and *Unidad Ciudadana*. These electoral lists have included candidates formally aligned with non-Justicialist parties, including the UCR. Of the complex electoral coalitions which have become a feature of Argentine politics since the end of Menemism, Carlos Gervasoni writes: “If the reader feels confused the point has been made. Not even scholars of Argentine parties thoroughly grasp this extremely complex scenario” (2018, 275).

criollismo stands as an important precursor to Peronism. I explore this antecedent to Peronism, and then look to other political movements that had been building support prior to Juan Perón's assumption of power, and which were incorporated into the Peronist coalition. Following this, I discuss the reorganisation of the Argentine economy under the last military dictatorship (1976–1983) and under the Menem presidency (1989–1999). I end by exploring the political coalition brought together by the Kirchners, noting both the continuities with traditional Peronism, as well as and the important differences manifested in twenty-first century Argentine populism. Rather than discuss the breadth of movements that were incorporated into Peronism and later Kirchnerism, I have selected a few key components of these coalitions, which I view as demonstrating the continuities and discontinuities between early Peronism and Kirchnerism, with an eye to foregrounding how these political movements were experienced in the rural interior.

The approach to political alignments as they exist in Argentina that I take in this chapter is at odds with many conventional understandings of populism. Analyses of Peronism have been foundational to the literature on populism, and the historian Federico Finchelstein suggests that Peronism represents “the first populist regime in history” (2017, 102). While this is an overstatement, it does correctly reflect the importance of Peronism to studies of populism. Authors thinking specifically about Peronist politics have drawn attention to the upwards flowing loyalty that the party demands (Auyero 2001; Stokes 2005; Fierman 2020; Mathias 2021). An influential approach to studying populism more broadly builds upon this, to suggest that populism writ large is characterised by central autocratic leaders who secure their support via a charismatic personalism and through patronage. This approach is most pronounced in political science. Kurt Weyland defines populism as “a political strategy through which a personalistic leader seeks or exercises government power based on direct, unmediated, uninstitutionalised support from large numbers of mostly unorganised followers” (2017, 50) and claims that “top-down agency forms the axis around which populism revolves” (2017, 54). Pierre Ostiguy (2017) similarly points to a charismatic style that leaders use to position themselves as uniquely capable of representing their publics. Meanwhile, Szusterman (2000) and Acemoglou et al. (2013) invoke a neoliberal economic fatalism to understand populism, suggesting it entails redistributive policies that attract wide support but are ultimately harmful to the economy. The authors see such policies as little more than attempts to buy loyalty.

These same analytics of patronage and personalism are drawn upon by anthropologist Rafael Sánchez (2016) in his genealogy of Venezuelan populism. Sánchez suggests that “the people” of populist politics are an artifact, created from the heterogenous, radically democratic “crowds”

but captured by the personalism and patronage of leaders so as to ensure a loyal and governable populace. He argues that that it is through the distribution of resources and “epic public performances ... outrageous asides, unexpected outbursts and veiled allusions” (2016, 7) that populist leaders maintain a governable people bound to them by “ties of love, patronage, identification” (2016, 301). This understanding has resonances with Héctor’s critique of the MCC as a grass-roots peasant movement demobilised by the patronage of the Kirchners. While I shared Héctor’s confusion regarding the reconciliation of agroecological tenets with Peronist modernism, I did not agree with his fatalistic interpretation of the MCC. Nor did I believe such a description accurately captured the relationship between Huerta Maipú and Kirchnerism, or other social organisations that took part in the Kirchnerist coalition.

While in this chapter I am mostly concerned with countering top-down explanations of populism by demonstrating what such explanations exclude, it is important that readers be mindful of the political stakes of such an interpretation. There are real and terrible consequences of depicting marginalized voters as in the thrall of manipulative populist leaders. Working in the northern Argentine province of Jujuy, Tabbush and Gaona (2017) examine the case of Milagro Sala and the *Organización Barrial Túpac Amaru* (la Túpac). Sala, an Indigenous (Coya) leader and Kirchner ally, had been head of la Túpac since its inception in 2003. In 2015, at the same time as Mauricio Macri assumed the presidency, thirty years of Peronist rule in Jujuy came to an end as the right-wing Gerardo Morales became provincial governor. Morales and Sala had clashed before, and soon after Morales came to power Sala was arrested on corruption charges. She spent three years incarcerated without trial, before eventually being sentenced to thirteen years imprisonment. Further, la Túpac was persecuted and many of its social services shut down. Tabbush and Gaona (2017) demonstrate that the image of Sala as a charismatic, but ultimately coercive leader engaged in clientelism, is one manufactured by the ruling Jujueña government and conservative media. This positions members of la Túpac – who are disproportionately poor, Indigenous women – as manipulated victims in need of rescuing. Drawing upon Abu-Lughod’s (2013) work, the pair demonstrate that by denying the political agency of members of la Túpac, conservative forces have justified the arbitrary detention of an activist leader, undone the community development projects which had tangibly improved the lives of marginalized Argentines, and reinscribed a racial, gender and class hierarchy in one of Argentina’s most unequal provinces.

Rather than accept populism as a strictly top-down phenomenon, in which a leader gathers support through charm and economic magnanimity, throughout this chapter I highlight the political agency of movements that formed part of Peronist coalitions. I take inspiration from

E.P. Thompson's notion of "history from below", and in line with this work I see the beneficiaries of Peronist social and economic policies as taking part "in an active process, which owes as much to agency as it does to conditioning" (1966, 9). Rather than a captured audience, I argue that the publics who brought first Perón and later the Kirchners to power were "present in their own making" (1966, 9), to adopt Thompson's famous maxim regarding the English working class. By being attentive to the intellectual and political movements that existed before and outside of Peronist coalitions, I de-centre "the leader" and make room for the political action and commitments of populist publics. To show the agency of Argentine populists engaged in projects which challenge the industrial agricultural model, it is necessary that I overview the way in which the Argentine state, and its configuration of land use and ownership, have developed.

The consolidation of the Argentine state

From the mid-nineteenth century Argentine statesmen sought to develop Argentina as a modern, liberal, and white nation within South America; agrarian and demographic policy were designed in concert with one another in order to realise this goal. In this section I will discuss the consolidation of the Argentine state in the second half of the nineteenth-century, as well as early state policies aimed at promoting agricultural development and population growth. These policies were thoroughly ideological. In the latter part of this section, I explain how the beliefs of liberal politicians and intellectuals of the era fundamentally shaped Argentina's emergence as an agricultural powerhouse. While the mid-nineteenth century may seem distant from the political geography in which I am interested, a discussion of this period is important for two reasons. First, failing to discuss the military campaigns of the era against the Indigenous peoples of Argentina would contribute to the settler-colonial project of erasure in which Argentina continues to engage. Secondly, the policies adopted during this period fundamentally shaped demography and land tenure in a way which is relevant today.

The agricultural economy that brought Argentina wealth and renown in the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century had its origins in the comparative neglect of the area during the Spanish colonial project. For most of its colonial history, Argentina existed on the underdeveloped outer limits of the Spanish *Virreinato del Perú*. Later, the map of colonial Latin America was redrawn under the Bourbon dynasty and the *Virreinato del Río de la Plata* was created in 1776. Unusually in the region, the colonial economy of what is now Argentina was not based upon imperial large-scale extraction of natural resources. The territory was poor in mineral wealth compared with Spain's colonial possessions in the Andean region and Central America. Instead, the cities that developed within Argentina's modern boundaries existed as

trading centres, the port city of Buenos Aires, for example, facilitating the movement of metals mined in Peru and Bolivia to Spain. During the war of independence (1810–1816), merchants who had become wealthy through outbound trade moved into internal trade, principally livestock agriculture – to which the extensive plains of Argentina’s Pampas were especially suited (Brown 1986).

Following independence, the process of national consolidation entailed an application of military force to establish Argentina’s borders, as well as to exert control within those borders. The second half of the nineteenth century was a period of ongoing changes to the borders of the republics in the Southern Cone. It was also a period of internal colonialism, as the newly independent states sought to open territories for agricultural and resource exploitation. In Argentina these two concerns combined in a series of wars from the late 1860s through to the early 1880s against the Indigenous population in the northern Chaco region, as well as in the southern parts of the Pampas through to Patagonia. Patagonia, until these campaigns, was entirely outside the control of the Argentine state. This led to an ambiguity with neighbouring Chile regarding the limits of each country’s borders, which the Argentine state was eager to clarify through military occupation.⁹ Beyond establishing clear national borders and exerting control within claimed areas, military action in Patagonia and the Pampas region also entailed agricultural considerations. These campaigns were in part financed by wealthy members of the *Sociedad Rural Argentina* (SRA: Rural Society of Argentina), who in turn were granted large tracts of land in newly annexed areas.

The military conquest of Indigenous lands was accompanied by a campaign aimed at attracting European migration. While large tracts of newly occupied territory were allotted to government allies in the SRA, the extent of the territory added to Argentina’s already vast lands in the second half of the nineteenth century is staggering. As well as obtaining everything south of the Río Negro and east of the Andes (the five Patagonian provinces: Tierra del Fuego, Santa Cruz, Chubut, Neuquén, and Río Negro, which collectively amount to approximately 673,000 square kilometres), the Argentine state also took over what is now the province of La Pampa (143,400 square kilometres) and consolidated control throughout many of the other central provinces. A policy of replacement followed the genocide carried out against Indigenous people; prior to the “Conquest of the Desert” the settler population of the Pampas region was limited to the towns, particularly port towns on the Paraná River on the Pampas’ eastern

⁹ The Indigenous peoples of the region had resisted Spanish attempts at colonization. As a result many sources from the early post-colonial era well into the second half of the nineteenth century categorized Patagonia as a separate country to Argentina and Chile (Navarro Floria 1999).

border. In 1869, the settler population of this whole region was only 772,000. The interior of the Pampas was opened for agriculture following the violent removal of Amerindians and by 1914 the pampas was home to some 4,200,000 Argentines and immigrants (Solberg 1987, 79).

The shape of national development in Argentina was deeply informed by the intellectual and ideological movements of the era: a modernist liberalism combined with a belief in environmental determinism. Ideas of modernity emerged in the European Enlightenment, promoting new ways of understanding individuals' relations to the political and natural world. Despite being culturally situated in western European thought, modernity claims a sense of universality; the extent to which it spread outside Europe and North America, however, relied upon ideas of European supremacy internalised by non-European subjects (Appadurai 1996; Gupta 1998). Theorists investigating modernity have pointed to the way in which modernist cosmology has encouraged subjects to see stark distinctions between the human and non-human world. Webb Keane points to European ideas of modernity as proposing agentive individuals distinct from their social ties as well as their entanglements with the material world (2002); likewise Bruno Latour suggests that the condition of modernity is premised upon an impetus of purifying "hybrids", neatly separating the natural from the social (1993). In Argentina, liberal thinkers viewed this as not a natural separation, but one which needed to be brought about before modernity could be reached.

In early modern Argentina, the nation's expansive landscape became subject to environmental deterministic fears held by the country's emergent liberal elite. For the former Argentine president Domingo Sarmiento and the constitutional draftsman Juan Alberdi the "desert" represented a threat to national progress. Both Sarmiento and Alberdi were members of the "Generation of '37" a group of liberal thinkers who opposed the dictatorship of Juan Manuel de Rosas. Both thinkers were concerned about the degenerative capacities of the wild Argentine plains. Sarmiento begins his treatise, *Facundo*: "Its own extent is the evil from which the Argentine Republic suffers; the desert encompasses it on every side and penetrates its very heart" (1998, 9). The extent of the plains, and their sparse population, influenced, for Sarmiento, both the Argentine character and the nation's political system, the former barbarically violent; the latter prone to despotism (1998).

Alberdi was likewise concerned about the effect vast swathes of land without European presence would have on the republic. His famous dictate "*Gobernar es poblar*" (to govern is to populate) spoke to this worry and implied a policy proposal to attract north-western European

migrants to settle, become Argentines, and improve upon the Argentine wilderness (and genetic stock) (Novoa 2007, 778). Michelle Murphy's work problematises the ostensibly neutral term "population" (2017; 2018). She depicts it as a value laden analytic through which human life can be read in the aggregate, inextricably linked to modernist political projects, as populations became constructed as sites of intervention in nation-states' developmental trajectories (2017). Murphy traces the eighteenth century, Malthusian roots of population to demonstrate that this way of imagining lives has always entailed an affective element bound up in racialized fears and insecurities. The fears of nineteenth century Argentine statesmen were not Malthusian, but instead were concerned with under-population. They did share, however, in the eugenicist ideas of national development through demographic intervention which Murphy suggests characterised the era's population policies (2017). For statesmen such as Sarmiento and Alberdi, then, the political modernisation of Argentina relied upon attracting European migrants to populate and tame its natural expanses.

Paradoxically, the desert was itself a trope (constructed both discursively and by military force) deployed by the Argentine state in order to achieve goals of population. The term "desert" was meant to evoke a wilderness characterised by its lack of population rather than by the aridity we might now associate with the term. The concerns of sociological crisis linked to underpopulation dovetailed into environmental determinist fears. Intellectuals suggested that animals imported from Europe which and subsequently abandoned by their owners in South America were transformed into more wild, "primitive" creatures, and that people too would follow this course if urban settlements did not come to dominate the Argentine desert (Novoa 2007).

This depopulation, while appearing threatening to statesmen such as Sarmiento, was central to the way Argentine governments of the 1850s and 1860s promoted their country internationally. Starting in 1856, the Argentine government contracted the French medic Victor Martin de Moussy to conduct geographic studies of peripheral areas of the state. This research was published in Europe with the intention of advertising Argentina's potential as a site for migrant settlement and capital investment (Navarro Floria 1999). In 1861, following the publication of de Moussy's first two editions of *The Description of the Argentine Confederation*, he was again contracted by the state, this time to survey Patagonia.

While it is unlikely de Moussy travelled much throughout Patagonia – his account largely reflects earlier texts now known to be erroneous – his report did serve a double purpose for the Argentine state. First, by including Patagonia within the boundaries of the nation-state, de

Moussy's work helped popularise the idea that Argentina already had dominion over lands south of the Río Negro, and in turn justify military campaigns. Secondly, de Moussy's depiction of Patagonia reinforced the image of a depopulated desert, its enormous agricultural potential awaiting European investment. Those Indigenous people who did populate this desert were depicted as nomadic, importantly lacking in claims to stable property and unbound by the sort of connection to place that agriculture both requires and provokes. Among Argentine statesmen, then, the desert served as a sort of Foucauldian productive problem upon which demographic and territorial questions would turn. At once barbaric and a threat to the institutions of Argentina as a European enclave and liberal democracy, the desert was simultaneously an untapped resource which would inevitably enrich a new class of agricultural investors. The threat of this former discursive iteration served as a rationale for the extreme military force applied to set the conditions of possibility for the latter desert.

By the terms which the ruling liberal elite of Argentina had set for themselves, this initial period of agrarian and demographic intensification was wildly successful. If the desire of the political and economic elite of Argentina was to populate the desert, this goal was achieved: in only thirty years, between 1870 and 1900, the population of Argentina almost tripled, rising from 1,737,076 to 4,607,000 (Solberg 1987, 19). This demographic explosion is made all the more startling by the fact that the majority of European workers were temporary residents, and did not settle in Argentina. A growing population (both permanent and itinerant) provided the workforce for Argentina's agricultural export boom, a process of growth even more rapid than the demographic boom experienced over the same period. In his comprehensive text comparing early agricultural policy in Argentina and Canada, Carl Solberg writes that "[Argentina's] Exports multiplied seven times between 1870 and 1900" (1987, 20). Agricultural exports reached such heights that by 1913 Argentine exports accounted for 30 percent of all Latin American export earnings, despite the nation's population only making up 9.5 percent of Latin America (Bulmer-Thomas 1994, 61). Unlike the other newly independent settler colonies to which Argentina was regularly compared at the turn of the century (i.e. Australia, New Zealand, and Canada), the Argentine state invested little in infrastructure or social policies that would have enabled this growth to continue (Solberg 1987). As such, Argentine agriculture was in a particularly weak position to cope with external shocks or indeed to expand further once new lands were no longer being forcibly added to the national stock. It is the weaknesses of this model, and its eventual rupture, which I will discuss in the following section.

The reaction against a European extractive colony

While staggering numbers of Europeans had migrated to make their homes in Argentina, and by some economic measures the nation was growing prosperous, the model of development being followed was far from an unambiguous success. In this section I will start by laying out the social costs of the laissez-faire Argentine agrarian model and discuss the conflicts generated within it. Persistent inequality, growing labour agitation, and a hostility toward the dominance of European identities in Argentina spurred the growth of a nativist celebration of Hispanic Argentine identity. While social discontent had been present throughout the duration of what is sometimes referred to as Argentina's "Golden Period", the global Depression of the 1930s would sound the death knell for this era. I end this section by discussing the replacement of economic liberalism by intermittent military rule and increasing state-led internal industrial development.

By the end of the so-called Golden Period, Argentina had made scant progress in improving the lives of its citizens and migrant workforce. In 1930, child mortality rates in Córdoba were 111.7 deaths per thousand live births. Solberg contrasts this figure with what was achieved by a more active state in Canada, where the rate was as little as half the Cordobés statistic (1987, 60). Similarly, while only 4 percent of Canadians over the age of ten were considered illiterate, in Córdoba 21.5 percent of those aged fourteen and over were recorded as such (Solberg 1987, 60).

The rural oligarchy, for whom this period really was golden, exerted an enormous influence over government policy, and continued to do so well into the twenty-first century. The anti-democratic *Partido Autonomista Nacional* (PAN; National Autonomist Party) ruled Argentina from 1874 through to 1916. PAN membership was made up by the rural aristocracy: initially this meant pampean cattle barons although increasingly grain cultivation in the region also afforded entry into elite society. The Sociedad Rural Argentina, which had been formed in 1866 as a lobby for this sector, effectively controlled agricultural policy within the PAN government and exerted great influence in other policy areas under PAN regimes as well (Manzetti 1992; Rock 1975). The SRA's relationship was less cosy with the *Unión Cívica Radical* (UCR; Radical Civic Union) which took power in 1916. Nevertheless, SRA members continued to fill the ministry of agriculture under the UCR, and at least a third of UCR congressmen in the period 1916–1930 were members of the rural aristocracy (Manzetti 1992). The SRA's economic liberalism did not compel the organisation to adopt a political liberalism. Throughout the course of the twentieth century the organisation supported coup d'états and took prominent positions in military governments, most infamously with José Martínez de Hoz, great-grandson

of the SRA's founding president, appointed economic minister under the last military dictatorship (1976-1983). Conversely, the SRA's relationship with Peronist and later Kirchnerist populisms was deeply antagonistic, as the organisation opposed the price controls and export restrictions imposed by both governments (Manzetti 1992; Perez Trento 2019).

The strength of the SRA, and the organisation's hostility toward government intervention in the agricultural economy made the issue of agrarian reform a political non-starter during the PAN and UCR regimes. As a result, most farmers throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were renters or sharecroppers, who laboured under highly exploitative conditions with insecure land tenure (Santos Martinez 1977; Palacios 2019). Moreover, through their influence on taxation and trade policies the rural oligarchy hampered the development of local industry – either directly through government subsidies or indirectly through a protection against international competition.

While the agricultural boom had been powered by the labour of foreigners, at the dawn of the twentieth-century Argentine politics was increasingly concerned with the status of immigrants, in the interior provinces and in Buenos Aires. Initially, PAN and the rural elite had welcomed immigration. Late nineteenth century elites largely held the same racist prejudices as the earlier Argentine statesmen discussed above, and the continual influx of migrant workers helped ensure labour would be cheap and easily obtainable. However, as immigrant groups became more settled, and started to protest against the exploitative conditions under which they laboured and the discriminatory taxes levied against them, PAN governments capitalised on anti-immigrant resentment within the criollo community and employed criollo militias to violently break agrarian strikes (Brown 1986).

The UCR's policy towards migrant communities was perhaps even more ambiguous. In its struggle against the political domination of PAN, the UCR saw migrant communities as a potential source of support. The party backed immigrant farming communities in their protests and promoted policies that would grant these communities greater political rights and local autonomy (Rock 2002). In 1912, in Santa Fe, a newly elected UCR provincial government responded to a farmer uprising by siding with the protesting tenant farmers, and pressured landlords to offer better terms to their renters (Solberg 1971). By contrast, the federal UCR government, elected in 1916, was no friend of immigrant workers – either rural or urban. That their leader, Hipólito Yrigoyen, did not support tenants rights can be explained by the fact that he was a large landholder, and that the Sociedad Rural Argentina maintained more influence politically than immigrant farmers – few of whom ever became naturalized citizens able to

participate in electoral politics. Moreover, despite agitating for universal suffrage as a means to break the political dominance of the oligarchy, the UCR was fundamentally an urban party catering to middle- and upper-class electors (Rock 2002; Mirelman 1975). As a result, the federal UCR rejected calls from small farmers (both tenants and labourers) to enact legislation that would grant minimum rental standards. In 1919, protests became both more widespread and more destructive, and the government answered industrial action by tenants and labourers with violent repression (Solberg 1971).

The same year saw industrial disruption in the cities as well, for which migrants were blamed in an increasingly xenophobic environment. A strike at a metallurgic factory was met with violence from private strike-breakers and from the police force who supported them; in the confrontation several workers were killed. When a general strike was called to protest against the killings, middle-class citizens of Buenos Aires, backed again by the police, took bloody retribution against the city's immigrant communities, which they blamed for the industrial disturbance. The Jewish community was particularly targeted, as the group was largely made up of Russian immigrants, and the middle-class Porteño public believed them to be involved in an international communist plot (Mirelman 1975; Munck 1987). At the end of *la Semana Trágica* approximately seven hundred people had been murdered.

The 1919 riots were the apogee of a long-building culture of xenophobia. A nativist current in intellectual life had been present since at least the 1872 publication of *The Gaucho Martín Fierro* by José Hernández. *The Gaucho Martín Fierro* remains one of the most important books in Argentine literature and celebrated of the rural, Gaucho identity, while displaying hostility towards foreigners (2004). Following Argentina's first major economic crisis in 1890, xenophobic attitudes grew more widespread. Immigrants were at once the supposed source of increasing labour agitation, and at the same time made up the bulk of Argentina's business owners. In 1902 the federal government introduced the "Law of Residence" enabling the deportation of foreign nationals involved in political disruptions (Munck 1987). The union movement also opposed immigration, viewing it as responsible for suppressing wages.

In intellectual circles, turn-of-the-century nativism was concerned as much with elite society's obsession with Europe as it was with striking workers. In 1901 the journal *Ideas* was founded by a group of law students in Buenos Aires, made up, predominantly, of the sons of prominent criollo families from the interior provinces (Rock 1987). This group, which later historical work would come to call the Cultural Nationalists, was inspired by the romanticism and nationalism of the Spanish "Generation of 1898". The Cultural Nationalists viewed modernist ideology and

policies, which were being pursued in late nineteenth-century Argentina, as an assault on the moral and spiritual character of the nation. In place of modernist thinking, they advocated a celebration of the Hispanicist identity of Argentina, which nationalist thinkers unanimously agreed was to be found in the rural identities of the interior (Delaney 2002; Rock 1987). The prominent Cultural Nationalist Ricardo Rojas adopted an integrationist stance towards immigrants, believing that foreigners could become part of the Hispanic Argentine race by means of the Argentine education system and the telluric forces of the land (Delaney 2002; Glauert 1963).

Many Cultural Nationalists had a broadly positive view of the Yrigoyen Radical government, which had throughout its time in opposition framed itself as one with “the people”, cultivated ties to the clergy, and incorporated Catholic thought into its social policy (Rock 1987). Following La Semana Trágica, however, Cultural Nationalists started to view the government as too beholden to labour and unable to establish order against the strikers – and in turn lent their support to the vigilante, strike-breaking *Liga Patriótica Argentina* (Argentine Patriotic League) (Rock 1987). The perceived weakness of the Yrigoyen government was scaled up to represent a weakness in democracy itself. Many Cultural Nationalists called for a coup against Yrigoyen. In 1930, when such a coup occurred in Yrigoyen’s second term, it was celebrated by the majority of Cultural Nationalist writers.

Peronist criollismo

I have paid particular attention above to the Cultural Nationalists because on the one hand, they represent a historical antecedent of Peronism, and on the other, a division in the political landscape that Peronism needed to overcome in order to build its electoral coalition. Studies of populism rarely give the appropriate attention to the traditions populist movements build upon, instead focusing on the top-down imposition of the will of a central leader, often through personal characteristics such as charisma. Attention to the antecedents of Peronism troubles readings of populism as personalist. There is a small irony in the fact that in depicting populism as personalist, authors elide populist movements’ cultural and political antecedents, and in doing so bolster leaders’ claims to personal magnanimity. Rather than seeing Peronist reforms as *sui generis*, as Perón himself cast them, here and in the next section of this chapter I will discuss the way in which the pre-existing intellectual and political movements were selectively pieced together to establish the Peronist coalition.¹⁰

¹⁰ An example of Perón’s self-aggrandisement and tendency to occlude the intellectual and political precursors to Peronist reforms can be found with regards agrarian reform. In the Peronist leaflet *Transcendentales*

If during the opening years of the twentieth century migration to Buenos Aires was overwhelmingly from European and Middle Eastern sources, by the 1930s this was no longer the case, and new Porteño denizens were more likely to be rural migrants from the interior. In 1895, Donna Guy reports, four out of five adults living in Buenos Aires were born overseas (primarily in Europe) (2009, 36). Following nearly two decades of intense internal migration, by 1947 almost three quarters of urban workers in Buenos Aires were internal migrants who had moved from the provinces (Milanesio 2010, 53). In the wake of the 1929 Wall Street stock market crash, and throughout the subsequent Great Depression, Argentine agricultural exports fell markedly. The collapse in grain prices led to a transition to the more capital-intensive farming of livestock throughout much of the Pampas and Littoral regions, which saw a marked concentration of land ownership (Santos Martínez 1977, 334). At the same time, the military regime and later, the military's favoured *Concordancia* coalition, instituted import substitution industrialisation (ISI) policies that led to the rapid growth of urban settlements powered by manufacturing positions; a development project undertaken throughout much of Latin America in this era (Bulmer-Thomas 1994). This dual process prompted large-scale migration from the interior provinces to the Argentina's cities, in particular Buenos Aires.

The arrival of rural migrants in Buenos Aires was a source of great anxiety to the city's developing white middle class. Argentina's rural population consisted largely of dark-skinned criollos. The term "criollo" at once evokes and deliberately elides discussions of racial difference (Chamosa 2010; Chamosa 2018). During the colonial era, "criollo" denoted those people of Spanish origin who were born in the colonies (in contrast to the politically favoured peninsulares, those born in Spain). In Argentina, the term came to mean the pre-immigration population of Spanish settler families, but also implies a degree of Indigenous heritage (carrying much the same meaning as "mestizo" in the rest of Latin America) as well as a non-metropolitan background. By the 1930s the darker skinned populations of the interior had been fully established as subaltern to the nation's developing white identity. Much of this was attributable to the scientific-racism-as-mode-of-development promoted by figures such as Alberdi, and the myth of Argentina as a white nation. Oscar Chamosa (2018) points to the role of Cultural Nationalists as paradoxically reinscribing Argentina's racial hierarchy. Analysing the boom in internal tourism that occurred throughout the 1920s and 1930s, Chamosa suggests

Declaraciones del Gral. Perón Sobre el Problema Agrario, Perón is quoted as saying: "It has been I who was first to come forward and say that the earth should be for he who works it, and that it should stop being a source of rents, and should become a source of work." (*Pero quién por primera vez en la Argentina se animó a decir que la tierra debía de ser por el que la trabajara y que debía dejar de ser un bien de renta para ser un bien de trabajo, he sido yo*). (Perón, nd.) While Argentina had never experienced the land reforms which took place in much of Latin America, calls for land reform had been common since at least the start of the 1900s, and were frequently based upon principles of use rights granted through labour.

that the nationalists' imperative that Argentines "know their country" spatially and temporally delimited these populations to an "authentic", non-metropolitan fringe. Such people were part of a non-modern interior, and upon their arrival in Buenos Aires did not retain the rustic charms they had once held for the white middle and upper class.

Though they arrived en masse throughout the 1930s, during the era of the *Concordancia*, it was in Peronism that the dark-skinned ex-rural population would find political salience. Derided by the established European-Argentine population as dirty, uncivilised, and out of place, this new urban population was excluded from participation in civil life within the capital, due to the low wages received by urban workers in the pre-Peronist period and the extreme social prejudice of the white *Porteños*. The rate of internal migration also markedly increased: in 1936 only eight thousand provincial migrants moved to the capital, but between 1937 and 1943 an annual average of seventy thousand internal migrants arrived, and between 1944 and 1947 the annual rural-urban trajectory rose again to one-hundred and seventeen thousand (Torre and Pastoriza 2014, 262).

Peronist discourse and iconography incorporated the Cultural Nationalism of the early twentieth century, while simultaneously reconfiguring this ideological project. Earlier Cultural Nationalism had largely been conservative, and although it celebrated rural folkloric production, it also separated folk art from the populations that produced it (Chamosa 2010). Rather than viewing the increasingly urbanised dark-skinned population as a symbolic reservoir upon which to draw, Peronism understood it to be a powerful electoral constituency. Peronism explicitly sought to incorporate dark-skinned Argentines into its support base. Most substantively, this included the Peronist government officially recognising Indigenous Argentines as citizens in 1947 (Gordillo 2006) and undertaking constitutional reform that saw voting rights granted to national territories where many Indigenous Argentines lived (Mathias 2021). Barring these substantive reforms, indigeneity was more often alluded to than explicitly discussed by the Peronist government. As Chamosa (2010) and Elena (2018) argue, overwhelmingly the Peronist government avoided explicit discussions of race, and the *criollo* – despite association with non-European Argentines – represented a racially ambiguous figure in which all Argentines could theoretically see themselves. This enabled Peronists to engage in important outreach with a section of the community that had traditionally been excluded from civic participation, while not limiting the party's potential appeal to second- and third-generation European settlers.

Revealing both the importance of the *criollo* in early twentieth century Argentine politics and the unoriginality of Perón's appeal to voters is the fact that the Rosarino UCR politician Ricardo Caballero successfully held together much the same coalition on the provincial level as Perón later built on the national one. In the increasingly nativist atmosphere of 1910s Santa Fe, Caballero made use of the conceptual slipperiness of "*criollo*" and "*gaucho*" to win the support of non-European Argentines as well as the working-class children of immigrants (Karush 1999).¹¹ Caballero combined class and national identities to create a *criollo* defined relationally as someone against the exploitation of Argentines by foreign bosses. Caballero used the in-vogue Cultural Nationalism to capitalise on anti-immigrant sentiments while simultaneously attaining the votes of second-generation settlers. Thirty years later, Perón would likewise draw upon the legacy of Cultural Nationalism to build his political coalition. By that stage it was not European immigrants but rural-urban migrants who were the maligned other for the Argentine polity. Perón's outreach to racialised communities helped assure their electoral support for his party, but, as with Caballero, Perón's coalition was built by incorporating racialised identities into class-based ones.

Piecing together the Peronist coalition

Doubtless influenced by the internal migration of the 1930s and 1940s that occurred in his native country of Argentina, Ernesto Laclau (2005) uses a hypothetical rural-urban migratory track to explain the various inputs into his model of populism. While in this thesis I argue for understanding populism as an ideology rather than Laclau's more expansive "way of constituting the unity of a group" (2005, 73), his explanation of populist coalition building is enlightening, and in this section I draw upon his work to explore the diverse antecedents to Peronist populism. Here I will explain Laclau's theory of populist mobilisation, discuss the various movements whose political causes the Peronist regime adopted, and explore how such a diverse body was held together in a populist coalition. It is also worth noting that by the Peronist period the eugenics that drove earlier modernisation projects had fallen out of favour. This is broadly in keeping with Michelle Murphy's temporalization of population. However, Argentina bucks the trend Murphy identifies of other mid-century settler colonies in that population did not serve as a facade for white supremacy (2017). Rather, Peronist

¹¹ Gaucho is the name given to the horsemen of Argentina, largely involved in nomadic cattle-herding. It is a similar identity to the North American "Cowboy," and implies an analogous "outlaw" relationship to the state. In some parts of the country the term explicitly references an Indigenous heritage. While there are still people who identify as Gauchos, it is mostly thought of in Argentina as folkloric.

modernisation entailed a state-guided developmentalism in which the economy would be made to work for a racially heterogeneous Argentina, albeit by downplaying racial difference.

For Laclau, populist movements are inherently coalitional. They calcify among diverse populations when groups realise that there is a shared source to their unanswered demands. Laclau distinguishes “democratic demands”, demands that remain isolated, from “popular demands”, those demands that articulate with other demands to form the basis of populist mobilisation (2005, 74). The widespread presence of unfulfilled demands (whether democratic or popular) within a population leads, Laclau argues, to an internal frontier in which “the people” are separated from institutional power by the structural disregard for their needs. When realising the shared root of this disregard is identified, we have the second step, as variegated demands are articulated together, forming a “chain of equivalence” (2005, 93). Without some form of unifying identity which sits above these popular demands, however, there can be no populist mobilization, as demands will be individually resolved and the coalition will break apart. Rural migrants who formed part of the Peronist coalition offered an important basis for the shared identity due to the long-standing equation of rural identity with authentic Argentinidad promoted by Cultural Nationalists. Within Peronism, however, the racial aspects of dark-skinned, rural-migrants identities were subsumed within a discourse of class-based difference. As I discuss later in this section, this Peronist logic of reframing race through a lens of class was applied also to rural peoples of the country’s interior provinces as Indigenous and campesino identities were recast to emphasise a (farm-)worker (*trabajador*) subjectivity.¹²

At the same time as elite Cultural Nationalists were celebrating rural identities as the most authentic expressions of the Argentine nation, a subaltern discourse of authenticity was emerging in which poverty and struggle were the true markers of Argentinidad. In the urban barrios, from the late 1920s through to the 1940s, a binary was being developed by producers of popular culture in which poverty denoted honesty and solidarity, and wealth was viewed as intrinsically anti-social and morally suspect. Karush (2010) explores the development of this subaltern trope, noting its presence throughout tango – an art form indigenous to the urban-poor – as well as in radio and domestic film, which while both coming from the media establishment, had their contents dictated by the advertising imperative of popular tastes.¹³ Peronism incorporated this subaltern nationalism into its political identity, constructing itself as

¹² I adopt the Spanish term “trabajador” (worker) to reference an imagined ideal, whereas I use the English “worker” to denote actual workers.

¹³ In some ways this mirrored the contemporaneous growth of Jazz as an artform produced by a subaltern community gaining popularity outside of that community. At the same time, Karush clarifies, the growth of Tango and radio-theatre was explicitly in response to Jazz, as a homegrown, and therefore more authentically popular, form of entertainment.

of, and for, the average Argentine. The Manichean thinking that characterised Peronism – in which Argentina was a nation of humble (but with Perón, comfortable) *trabajadores*, and Argentine elites were parasitic and linked to foreign interests – borrows directly from the pre-existing discourses Karush identifies within mass culture. Karush clarifies an important difference between the existing discourse and its re-framing within Peronism. Where there had previously been an almost conservative fatalism to this valorisation of the poor, in which the virtue of the poor and villainy of the rich meant that any form of personal economic advancement was stigmatized, under Perón the improvement of material welfare was an egalitarian promise (Karush 2010).

This promise was met through the development of the welfare state under Perón, and the government's pro-worker industrial policies. There was very little new in the project of building a state-run welfare system. The Argentine state had been attempting to take over the existing patchwork of privately run welfare from charities and ethnic associations since at least the mid-1920s, and calls for a centralised state management of welfare intensified throughout the 1930s, during and in the wake of the Great Depression (Guy 2009). Institutional strength, rather than ideological orientation, allowed Peronism to succeed where earlier governments had failed in taking over a welfare system built out of private charities jealous of their independence. The material welfare of the poor was also improved under Peronism through the government's support of organised labour. Perón's efforts while labour secretary and later as president, helped to unite a fragmented labour movement as well as significantly expand the size of unions. From 1946 to 1951 total union membership more than quadrupled, from 520,000 to 2,334,000 (James 1988, 10). Peronist reforms strengthened unions' negotiating power, while also making them more central to the social lives of working Argentines – a project that ranged from managing government funded vacation spots to the administration of social-welfare under the *obras sociales* (Elena 2011; Torre and Pastoriza 2014). This alliance could perhaps better be described as a takeover. While Peronist reforms certainly strengthened unions, industrial action was already increasing throughout the 1930s and early 1940s but would decline sharply throughout Perón's reign. Unions that were not supportive of Peronism were excluded from negotiations with only one union per sector legally registered, and throughout the Perón era established union leaders – even those who had been Peronist allies – were gradually removed (James 1988; Buchanan 1985).

Outside Argentina's cities, Peronism sought to bring the rural poor more closely in line with urban workers. Before Perón took power, rural workers lacked many of the formal protections afforded to their urban counterparts. At its worst, rural labour approximated feudalism – debt

bondage and payment in kind were common (Santos Martinez 1977; Palacio 2019). The *Estatuto del Peón Rural* established minimum wages as well as minimum standards for housing and food when they were provided by the employer, introduced rules governing maximum hours worked per week, and granted rural labourers the same access to paid holiday leave and protection against unfair dismissal as that enjoyed by urban workers (Palacio 2019). Peones, rural labourers, were not the only rural group targeted for Peronist reform. Tenant farmers and sharecroppers also represented a large proportion of rural workers in the late 1930s and 1940s (Santos Martinez 1977).¹⁴ In the Pampas of the early 1930s, a mere 36 percent of farms were owner-operated (Solberg 1987, 55). Peronist lawmakers sought to increase the rate of ownership among sharecroppers and cash renters. The 1949 constitutional reforms identified the ability of all rural labourers to purchase the land they worked as a social right, and the national bank was directed to offer loans of up to 100 percent to enable the purchase of farms (Santos Martinez 1977). The government also sought to improve working conditions by legislating minimum terms for rental contracts, establishing arbitration committees, and promoting other initiatives intended to increase the financial independence of tenant farmers from their landlords. In a semiotic move that would become part of the Peronist playbook during the Kirchner era, landowners and rural organisations that opposed the Peronist reforms were labelled an anti-national oligarchy.

The Peronist project of standardising the rural-worker experience with that of their urban-counterparts was not simply about extending workers' protections to the rural poor, but of extending a *trabajador* identity to this constituency as well. While Peronism was committed to celebrating rural and dark-skinned Argentines, the movement simultaneously attempted to flatten differences internal to the Argentine population. Christine Mathias (2021) notes that although Peronism maintained good relations with Indigenous Argentine communities and offered important reforms to the population, it generally shied away from addressing Indigenous Argentines as Indigenous, preferring to semiotically incorporate them into a *trabajador* identity. Likewise, the term "campesino" was all but excluded from Peronist discourse, with variations of rural worker (*trabajadores/obreros rurales*), workers of the countryside (*trabajadores del campo*) or workers of the soil (*trabajadores de la tierra*) taking its place. Within the Peronist didactic tome *Libre, Justa, Soberana* (1950), published to advertise the advances of the Peronist revolution, the term "campesinos" is used only once in

¹⁴ While exact numbers are difficult to calculate due to the dearth of historical work focusing on Peronism in the countryside (see Palacio 2019), Santos Martinez gives us some idea of the situation, when he writes: According to the agricultural census of 1937, 39% of the 200,312 rural exploitations were organized through payment in kind, as such the effects of the crisis fell on the farmer" (Santos Martinez 1977, 342).

over four hundred pages. The adoption of a *trabajador* identity by rural people was institutionally supported by the Peronist state as well, as it helped to establish farmers' cooperatives, mirroring both the industrial model of the unions, and the government's verticalist relationship to them (Santos Martinez 1977). In Peronist political logic the pre-existing cultural difference that existed between *Porteño* factories and the Argentine interior – parts of which had only come under effective state control a little over half a century before Perón's ascendancy – had to be flattened in order for the central state to extend the workers' revolution to the countryside. While rural people certainly benefited from Peronist reforms, they did so through identities in which they likely would not have previously recognised themselves.

The celebration of dark-skinned Argentine *criollismo*, and the simultaneous submission of Indigenous and *campesino* identities within Peronism highlights a paradox in thinking through Peronist politics, and illustrates an important element to understanding those same politics. As I have been pointing toward throughout this section, there was little novelty in Peronism. Rather, Peronism brought together a series of already existing intellectual movements and political demands. Like the Peronist movement, the Peronist Party itself was not a monolith, and recent histories of Peronism have highlighted the breadth and lack of internal coherence of the Peronist regime (cf. Elena 2011; Karush 2010; Milanesio 2010; Palacios 2019). Adamovsky (2018) is attentive to Peronist leaders outside the ruling cadre to highlight the diversity of Peronist discourse, particularly regarding issues of race. Peronist visual propaganda included a profusion of images of dark-skinned people which Adamovsky suggests entailed both an outreach to historically excluded sections of the Argentine populace, and a cynical attempt to depict the “authentic Argentine” as one who phenotypically resembled Perón's supporters (2018).

The construction of an authentic Argentine identity is at the heart of the seeming contradiction regarding Peronism's simultaneous celebration and submission of non-white identity. Peronist discourse was contradictory because it was authored by a heterogenous coalition with competing ideas about the nation. While Peronism drew upon earlier Cultural Nationalism and courted a racialised voting bloc, the coalitional nature of Peronist politics required that any shared identity be broad enough to incorporate a racially diverse workforce. Laclau's theory of populist mobilisation relies upon a shared identity that extends beyond articulated demands. Without a shared identity, demands would be individually addressed, and the populist coalition would slowly fall apart. By drawing upon the cultural salience of *criollismo*, while largely avoiding the xenophobia that had been associated with its previous usage, Peronists were able to effectively lay claim to representing authentic Argentines while not excluding the large

immigrant community from the coalition they were piecing together. Even broader than the racially ambiguous *criollo* was the figure of “the *trabajador*” – capable of integrating this diversity under a single identity (cf. James 2000, 19). This, however, could not be the *trabajador* as narrow economic identity, for while the Peronist coalition did draw its ranks heavily from the working poor, many of its members would not have recognised themselves within the image of the proletarian *trabajador*. Furthermore, although the unions did form a central institution in Peronist power, Peronism was not exclusively targeted to the working class, and attempts were initially made to build a cross-class coalition through the intensification of import-substitution industrialisation (ISI) and the development of national welfare policies, both important projects for the middle classes. Through the figure of a *trabajador* delinked from class and a *criollo* decoupled from race, Peronism sought to offer an authentic Argentine identity for any who would join the coalition. The seeming contradictions inherent in this identity should be understood as excess left over from the intellectual and political movements from which Peronism selectively borrowed.

Between populisms

Perón was removed from power in 1955 by a military coup calling itself the “Liberating Revolution”. He was briefly reinstated in 1973 and died in 1974. The Kirchner-era began in 2003 when Néstor Kirchner took office. While I am mostly interested in this chapter in examining how different political groupings come to form populist coalitions, it is worthwhile briefly discussing the decades between populist presidential regimes in Argentina, particularly as the era gave rise to a new iteration of Argentine modernism.

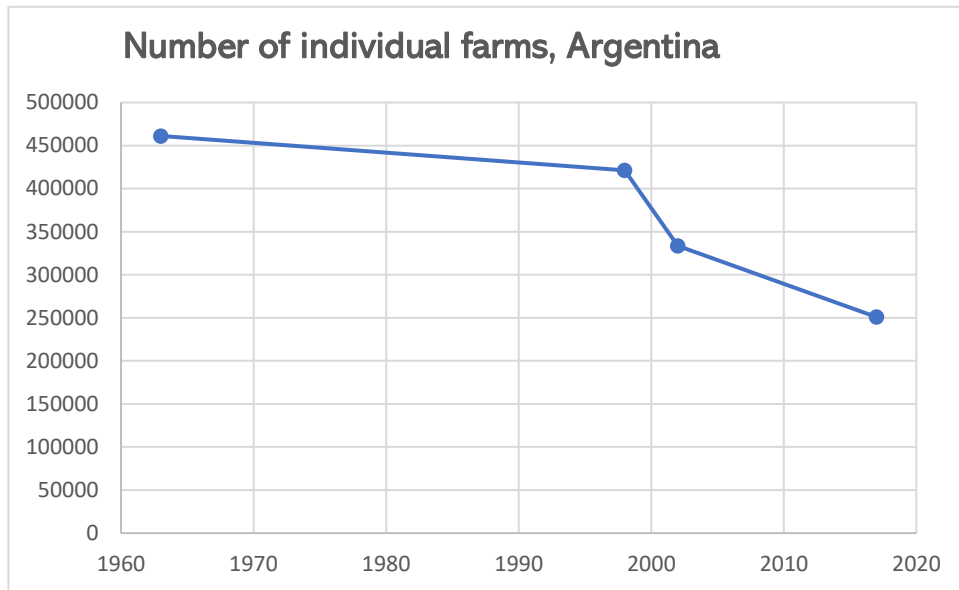
Although the coup d’état that ended the second Peronist government committed itself to removing all traces of Peronism from the national polity, this did not result in large-scale macro-economic reorganisation. The new regime, and the intermittent civilian and military governments that followed it, maintained the protectionist ISI policies put in place during the 1930s and intensified during Peronism, as well as many Peronist welfare policies. It was not until the last military junta (1976–1983) that the pro-worker policies of Peronism were meaningfully dismantled. The dictatorship viewed the unions as a potential source of resistance to its regime. Through neoliberal reforms the regime at once sought to re-establish traditional class and racial hierarchies and also weaken union power. Opening the economy diminished the importance of Argentine heavy industry in particular and promoted the precaritisation of labour while at the same time the state commitment to full employment was abandoned (Perelman 2013; Grimson and Kessler 2005; Undurraga 2015).

Pro-market reforms were deepened during democracy under Carlos Menem (1989–1999). The Menem government, while initially elected on a standard Justicialist social welfare platform, soon turned to promoting neoliberal reforms – in part as a means to control the hyper-inflation which had plagued the final days of the predecessor government of Raúl Alfonsín. This policy agenda included the privatisation of state companies, slashing of welfare, cuts to state services, and removing burdens on the private sector through lowering taxes and loosening regulations (Rojo and Hoberman 1994; Grimson and Kessler 2005; Shever 2012). De-industrialisation further progressed as the Argentine economy was geared towards agricultural exports (Undurraga 2015).

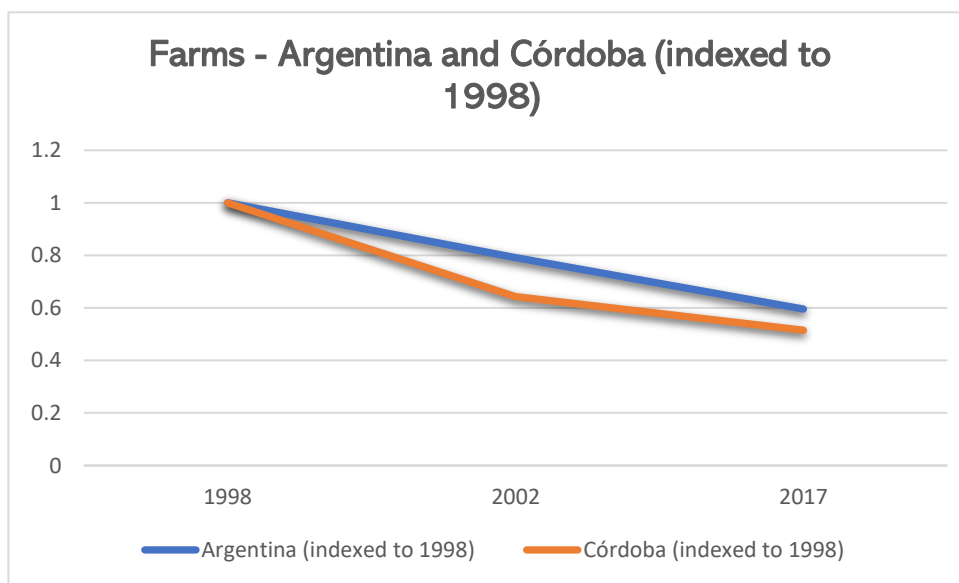
In terms of agricultural policy, the Menem government again adopted free-market fundamentalism. A laissez-faire attitude towards public health was adopted when in 1996 the national government approved the commercial use of Monsanto's "Roundup Ready" genetically modified soy beans, a product designed to be resistant to the pesticide glyphosate.¹⁵ Following Washington Consensus precepts, Menem's government cut farm subsidies, increased interest rates on agricultural loans, and removed trade protectionism making small scale farming unprofitable; between 1988 and 2002 the number of farms in Argentina fell by 21 percent, while the average size of a farm grew by 25 percent (Gras and Hernandez 2014, 343). Graph 1. shows the sharp drop in the number of individual farms throughout the late Menem era after a long period of relatively stable numbers. Graph 2. points to this process of the concentration of land ownership as even more aggravated in Córdoba, with the fall in individual farm numbers that occurred in the late 1990s being sharper and more sustained. The concentration of land ownership in the 1990s spurred rural-urban migration. Unlike in the 1930s, however, Argentina during Menemismo was undergoing a process of de-industrialization, and peri-urban barrios drew in the rural-poor and urban-poor alike. This is the process by which Barrio Maipú experienced a demographic explosion, and by which many of my interlocutors' families found themselves in the peri-urban exurb.¹⁶

¹⁵ The effects of glyphosate on human health are thoroughly contested. It has been linked in medical studies to birth defects, respiratory issues, and cancer. The WHO's sub-body on cancer the International Agency for Research on Cancer regards the substance as "probably carcinogenic" to humans https://www.iarc.who.int/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/QA_Glyphosate.pdf

¹⁶ Menem era policies effectively transformed Córdoba's Cinturón Verde. See Gutiérrez (2013) and Capdevielle (2014) regarding the nearby and demographically analogous Malvinas Argentinas.



Graph 1. number of individual farms, Argentina; graph by author (Lewis 1990s; INDEC 2002; INDEC 2019)



Graph 2: Individual farms – Argentina and Córdoba. Graph by author (INDEC 2002; INDEC 2019)

Before turning to a more thorough discussion of Kirchnerism, it is also worth noting the relationship between Menemismo and Indigenous organizations in Argentina. While the earlier Justicialist government of Juan Perón had sought to minimise the internal diversity of the nation, the neoliberal Menem era saw a proliferation of Indigenous rights organisations throughout Argentina (cf. Briones 2005). This is in line with Terrence Turner's (2007) theorisation of the growth of indigeneity internationally. Turner argues that the "class

compromise” welfarist policies that were commonly followed by states around the globe following World War II emphasised an internal, national homogeneity. Such policies sought to integrate racially diverse populations, and the Peronist project of the 1940s and 1950s, which I discussed earlier, exemplified this mid-century modernist trend. By contrast, Turner notes, the neoliberal era saw a global proliferation of Indigenous movements – articulating claims explicitly on the basis of their indigeneity. Turner suggests that the retreat from state-welfare that occurred in the United States in the 1970s (but most markedly in Argentina during the Menem era) caused a global reconceptualisation of the role of states, no longer regarded as guarantors of citizens’ economic security, but rather deriving their international legitimacy from defending a “right to difference” (2007, 121). The diminishing emphasis on national homogeneity, combined with the intensification of resource extraction in peripheral areas of the state has led, Turner argues, to the growth of Indigenous movements using the newfound salience of multicultural difference as the basis for territorial claims and social protections. In the Latin American context, Shaylih Muehlmann (2009) provides an ethnographically grounded account of this dynamic playing out in Mexico. Muehlmann argues that in contrast to the class-based organisation of the early twentieth century, which encouraged Indigenous groups to identify as campesinos, in the neoliberal era rural groups more successfully attain use-rights to environmental resources through emphasising their indigeneity.

The 2003 special issue of the *Journal of Latin American Anthropology*, regarding indigeneity in Argentina speaks to this process in which marginalised, non-European Argentine populations came to self-identify as members of specific, extant Indigenous groups (Gordillo and Hirsch 2003; Lazarri 2003; Schwittay 2003). There is a degree of tension here, as while Menemismo saw the emergence of Indigenous organizations, it was also a period in which the myth of white Argentina was widely clung to (Guano 2003). This tension is mirrored in state attitudes towards Indigenous peoples, for while the 1994 constitutional reforms did include a recognition of Indigenous Argentines in a way not done until that point, the recognition was formalistic and largely related to Congress’ ability to legislate regarding Indigenous groups (Brinks and Blass 2018). Schuster’s (2010) reading of the reform commission debates highlights the extent to which Indigenous recognition was framed around reconciliation for past injustice, implicitly rejecting any policies of remediation for the modern discrimination and marginalisation of Indigenous peoples. Simultaneously, Menem’s agenda further disenfranchised Indigenous Argentines through reforms facilitating resource extraction in Argentina’s border regions, areas in which Indigenous groups tend to live and have been most politically active.

Between the time of the last military government and the end of the Menemismo, the Peronist modernising project of pro-worker, state-led development had been torn down and replaced with something new. This was visible not only in the fact that the full-time unionised figure of mid-century modernism had become an untenable aspiration for most Argentines, but also in the changing ways in which groups on the margins of Argentine society were identifying themselves. These changing modes of self-identification relate to a shift in the way Argentines understood and experienced modernity. Anthropologists who problematised “modernity” around the turn of the millennium have suggested that although the theory of modernisation may be bunk social science, relying upon teleological models of social progress, modernity still exerts a convincing draw as a “social fact” or “myth” upon many people around the world, including in regions deemed to be non-modern (Gupta 1998; Ferguson 1999; Keane 2002). Drawing upon his work in the Zambian Copper-belt in the wake of the neoliberal reforms of the 1980s, Ferguson argues that mining communities live with modernity as a never realised promise moving further out of reach. He writes, “This is modernization through the looking-glass, where modernity is the object of nostalgic reverie, and ‘backwardness’ the anticipated (or dreaded) future” (1999,13). Images of a lost modernity similarly populate the discourse of Argentines, the point of temporal reference alternating between the Golden Period of the turn of the century and the Peronist years of the 1940s and 1950s. In Argentina the loss of modernity has not occasioned a straight-forward closing off of futures, but has given rise to an array of new possibilities. The homogeneity of Peronist modernism was no longer a convincing characterisation of the nation, in its place heterogeneity reigned. The populism of the Kirchners, unlike its mid-century predecessor, came to see this diversity as a source of political strength. It is this populism through diversity to which I will now turn.

The Kirchnerist coalition

Populist Kirchnerism engaged in the sort of coalition building that Laclau views as definitive of populist mobilisation, just as mid-century Peronism had before it. Kirchnerist coalitional politics was, however, qualitatively different to that of early Peronism. With an eye to these differences, in this final section I discuss the way in which Kirchnerists built a populist coalition. Returning to Héctor’s critique with which I started this chapter, I take the incorporation of the MCC into Kirchnerism as a case study through which to understand the similarities and differences of the two populist coalitions I have been discussing throughout.

A marked distinction between traditional Peronism and Kirchnerism is the relationship the regimes maintained with Argentina’s Indigenous people. As discussed above, although early Peronism did seek to address Indigenous disadvantage, this was generally framed within the

Justicialist language of poverty alleviation or pro-rural-worker policies. By contrast Kirchnerism embraced the discourse of indigeneity which had been bubbling away during the neoliberal era. Eduardo Elena neatly explains this distinction, “Peronists – like other mid-century nationalists – saw homogeneity in a far more positive light, and popular majorities were valued over a mosaic of distinct minorities” (2018, 187) by contrast “under the Kirchner governments (2003–2015), Argentina adopted Peronist versions of ‘pluriculturalism’ that celebrated racial diversity in a variety of policy areas” (2018, 185). In a particularly high-profile instance of pro-Indigenous cultural politics, Cristina Fernández de Kirchner ordered the removal of a statue of Christopher Columbus that stood behind the *Casa Rosada*, Argentina’s presidential offices. Kirchner ordered the statue replaced with one honouring Juana Azurduy de Padilla, a female Indigenous leader in Argentina’s war of independence against Spain (Frei 2019). Symbolic gestures such as this were backed up by more tangible policy aimed at addressing Indigenous disadvantage. While the 1994 Constitution had mandated the creation of the National Institute of Indigenous Affairs (INAI) it did not become fully operational until the first year of the Kirchner-era (Schuster 2010). Likewise legislation regarding Indigenous health and education as well as legislation aimed at increasing Indigenous groups’ access to traditionally held lands were passed during the Kirchner era.¹⁷

The nascent Córdoba Campesino Movement was similarly interested in foregrounding the existence of non-white identity in Argentina. Unlike much of Latin America, in Argentina, and in Córdoba in particular, campesino was for a long period not a commonly adopted identity. Activists within the MCC frequently reported that one of the principal achievements of the movement had been to change “campesino” from an insult into an identity people actively wanted to see in themselves. The self-recognition of campesino identities was related to the revaluation of indigeneity as MCC activists – particularly those who had joined the movement after graduating from urban universities – stressed the Indigenous roots of campesino peoples. Links were drawn to the supposed continuity of practice in food, medicine, and agricultural methods; friends of mine pointed to the use by campesinos of Córdoba’s *algarroba* tree in their cooking, or the practice of gathering native herbs to use for their healing properties as proof of this continuity. Despite its recent uptake in Argentina, agroecology was often described as a continuation of pre-Hispanic farming; statements such as “the first to do agroecology were the Indigenous people” were ubiquitous among the more professionalised activists. Again, in clear contrast with the first Peronist government, which took pains to avoid the use of the term “campesino,” this identity was encouraged by the Kirchners, most concretely through Ley

¹⁷ See in particular, *leyes nacionales* 26.160; 26.206; and 26.522

27.118, through which the government gave legislative definition to the term “campesino”, and enacted specific rights and protections for people identified as campesino.

The symbolic support the Kirchner governments offered campesino social organisations to assert their cultural identity was coupled with substantive aid enabling their development. Agricultural policy was a key means through which Kirchnerism supported the development of rural social movements such as the MCC, and towards the latter end of the Kirchner era agroecology became particularly important within this dynamic. State agricultural departments were mobilised to support MCC programs. INTA administered discretionary grants to organisations such as the MCC through the ProHuerta program. This program had been running since the Menem-era but, as an INTA technician I interviewed in 2018 explained, had become primarily aimed at promoting agroecology.¹⁸ In 2008, the federal government created the *Secretaria de Agricultura Familiar* (SAF; Secretariat of Family Agriculture), a body specifically devoted to small-scale, particularly campesino, production.¹⁹ Tellingly, SAF included a sub-secretariat of *Fortalecimiento Institucional* (Institutional Strengthening), specifically tasked with engaging with and ensuring the participation of rural social movements such as the MCC (Noguiera and Urcola 2017). SAF and INTA provided formal employment for many of the professionalised activists who had come from Córdoba or other cities to organise MCC branches.

¹⁸ Much of the institutional support for agroecology coming from the Argentine state since the turn of the century has been administered by INTA. INTA, particularly since 2002, has enjoyed a high degree of autonomy, and the orientation toward agroecology within INTA has been pushed by technicians within the organisation. As Patrouilleau et. al. (2017) show, this orientation was supported by an array of government policies during the Kirchner era.

¹⁹ While the body was created in 2008 as a sub-secretariat, it was in 2009 promoted to the rank of secretariat. Under Macri the body returned to being a subsecretariat.



Figure 1: Campesinos keeping bees in monte nativo. Honey production is one of the industries which the MCC have promoted in the north-west of Córdoba

The support given to Indigenous rights groups, as well as to the MCC, is characteristic of what one of my interlocutors described as the Kirchners' "turn to horizontalism" (cf. Lazar 2017; Calvo and Murillo 2012). While the union movement had long been a pillar of Peronist support, intra-party factionalism during the Kirchner era meant that it was no longer reliable as a verticalist vehicle through which the federal Peronist leadership could implement nation-wide social policy. In a process started by Néstor, but intensified under Cristina, the Kirchners developed more direct relationships between the federal government and already existing civil-society groups. When these relationships involved social welfare plans, as they often did in the post-crisis era, Kirchnerists worked to ensure they were administered by the Ministry of Social Development. Prior to the Kirchner-era, conditional cash transfers and grants to community level organisations were largely administered through the Ministry of Labour. Again, Justicialist factionalism meant that Kirchnerist social policy could only reliably be instituted through the Ministry of Social Development, controlled by Néstor's sister, Alicia Kirchner (Fenwick 2016). This enabled the Kirchners to circumvent potential obstruction from within their own party, while also appealing to voters through social welfare more directly linked to Néstor Kirchner's administration. The Ministry of Social Development was responsible for administering various programs that the MCC accessed. These included individualised social welfare plans for members, but also projects that institutionally strengthened the movement,

such as ProHuerta funding for community-farming developments and a micro-credit program managed through MCC branches throughout the province.

Controlling the management of social welfare plans also enabled the Kirchners to cater to Peronism's traditional constituency of the urban poor without ceding power to the unions. This entailed a reversal of Menemist policy. During the 1990s the urban poor experienced neoliberal reforms perhaps more acutely than any other segment of Argentine society. In protest against their increasingly untenable living conditions, collectives of unemployed people emerged in the 1990s, and gained further prominence during the millennial crisis. These groups became known as *piqueteros* due to their strategy of roadblocks (*piquetes*), in particular blocking major motorways, to demand state assistance in the face of growing poverty. Much work has noted the incorporation of piqueteros within the Kirchnerist coalition (Zelaznik 2011; Perez and Natalucci 2010; Kaese and Wolff 2016).²⁰ Piquetero groups remained important throughout the Kirchner years as reliable attendees of Kirchnerist rallies, and as community organisations facilitating Kirchnerist welfare programs. This incorporation, however, should not be understood as a wholesale takeover of the piquetero movement by Kirchnerism, but rather as an alliance in which piqueteros influenced government policy. As political scientists such as Rachael Weitz-Shapiro (2006) and Augustina Giraudy (2007) show, the distribution of welfare policies in the early Kirchner years was not determined solely by clientelist politics but was also directed by the pressure exerted through social organisations' mobilisation.

In a similar vein, Héctor's dismissal of the MCC as having been subsumed within the Peronist project did not account for the possibility that campesino groups genuinely shared the developmentalist vision the Kirchner governments promoted. Federico, a senior member of the MCC's political committee, did express regret that the movement had become so dependent upon financial support from the Kirchnerist governments. At the same time, he lauded Kirchnerism as the foremost "expression of a national, popular, Latin-Americanist movement". These were the same values, he explained, that the MCC held. That the political aims of historically excluded groups align with regimes proposing state-led development should not be understood as a process of political capture of the former by the latter. Based on ethnographic data collected in Chavista Venezuela, Amy Cooper (2019) argues that receiving state services can be a deeply pleasurable, affirming experience for marginalised populations. Similarly, when I visited Ana and her husband Carlos, active members of the MCC living in northern Córdoba, the couple showed me around their home, proudly pointing to the

²⁰ See Perez and Natalucci (2010) for a particularly detailed discussion of the way in which piquetero associations acted within a Kirchnerist coalition while being outside of, and at times directly hostile to, the Justicialist party.

extensions and improvements they had made to the building during the Kirchner-era. Ana told me that “the happiest years of our lives were those twelve years with Cristina governing. And all that she did, in six months this new guy [Macri] undid.” Carlos, who was a Kirchner aligned local-councilman, took me the shed in which he and other community members package chemical-free livestock feed, specifically tailored to the needs of various farm animals. He explained that the funding for this project had been provided through Kirchner government grants, and he had named the project for the deceased Néstor. Carlos summed up the pair’s admiration for the Kirchners by stating, “You have to support someone who brings the state to where it had never before been.”

It would be naïve to suggest that there was not a degree of *realpolitik* in Kirchnerism’s support for campesino groups such as the MCC – particularly evidenced by the tight control of funds through the Ministry of Social Development. Kirchnerists understood that small-scale farmers, oriented towards domestic consumption markets rather than aligned with export agriculture offered a potential support base, much needed Córdoba, a province which has been historically difficult for Kirchnerism.²¹ Likewise, Kirchnerists’ assistance to piquetero groups, or Indigenous bodies, was not politically disinterested. Nor was the backing of human rights campaigns, evidenced through Néstor’s overturning of impunity laws that barred prosecution of military personnel for crimes associated with the Junta (Faulk 2012; Zelaznik 2011), or through the legislation of marriage equality, passed under Cristina.

Much like the coalition of the first Peronist government, the Kirchnerist coalition was pieced together from pre-existing social movements. Unlike the mid-century coalition, however, Kirchnerism did not attempt to subsume these diverse groups into one overarching identity but rather embraced, and even supported, the diversity of its constituency. Forging alliances with social organisations through the distribution of public money was undoubtedly part of the Kirchnerist playbook. This should not be understood as proof that populism is little more than top-down patronage, as some authors have argued. Rather, reading such grants of public money alongside the tangible successes of Indigenous, campesino, and human rights movements which joined the Kirchner coalition, we can view it as yet another way in which

²¹ Due to the unusual electoral outcome of 2003 - in which Menem gained the most votes in the first round, but chose not to contest the runoff with Néstor Kirchner -, the nature of first round and second round voting, and changes in electoral laws ushered in by CFK it is difficult to make clear comparisons between electoral results. The Kirchners themselves, or Kirchner aligned candidates have however, on average fared 17.7 percent lower in Córdoba than their national vote in the last five presidential elections. This is compounded by the fact that the Governor of Córdoba, despite being a Peronist, is deeply hostile to Kirchnerism. (Calculations by author, based upon data available at <https://www.argentina.gob.ar/interior/dine/resultadosyestadisticas>).

grass-roots organisations successfully made demands against the state. This situation was enabled by the lack of institutional support Néstor Kirchner commanded within the Peronist party machine, and later by the antagonistic relationship that existed between Cristina Fernández de Kirchner and the labour unions throughout her presidency. In place of a strong, top-down relationship, the Kirchner era was marked by contingency and a multi-directionality of demands.

Conclusion

The MCC were not responsible for Alberto Fernández's 2019 presidential election, for electing Cristina Fernández de Kirchner to the role of vice-president, or for ensuring the continued viability of Kirchnerism as a political project in Argentina. Neither were the Piqueteros, nor the growing Indigenous movement. All, however, formed part of a broad coalition to establish and maintain Kirchnerism as the dominant iteration of the Peronist project. The historical review I have presented in this chapter helps throw into relief the structure, but also contingency of populist mobilization. There are commonalities between political movements which brought to power the first Peronist regime and the more recent Kirchner governments. Populations which had been disregarded by governments prior to Perón, or during the Menemismo, mobilised in both cases to support populist candidates. In both cases a vision of Argentina built out of pre-existing intellectual and political movements was offered to voters.

Attention to the coalitional nature of Peronist politics belies suggestions that social analysts and followers of politics more broadly should understand populism as nothing more than personalism or patronage. Peronism and Kirchnerism were movements of their time, and the way they addressed constituents' needs reflects this. Traditional Peronism's homogenising "trabajador" identity fitted with an international mid-century modernism, just as the explicit diversity of Kirchnerist populism responded to a local realisation of the impossibility of modernist promises in the wake of a globalised neoliberalism. While the Kirchnerist coalition is more obviously heterogenous, both movements gained power by responding to diverse demands. Some of these were economic demands, others were demands for political inclusion, an end to racial or sexuality-based discrimination, or simple demands for justice against a culture of impunity. Depicting populism as a top-down, cynical performance robs voters of political agency. As I discussed in the introduction to this chapter drawing upon Tabbush and Gaona (2017), this has very real effects on populism's constituents. Constructing populist publics as a captured audience discursively justifies policies which contravene their democratically expressed will.

In this chapter I have refused this construction of the supporters of populist projects as politically captured or lacking in political agency. Academic readings of populism often point to leaders' charisma and their supposed patronage. In place of this reading, I have shown that populist movements gather together coalitions of pre-existing intellectual and political groups. Following Laclau, I see these groups as banding together in enunciating previously unmet demands. Rather than being top-down, the flow of power in populist coalitions is thoroughly multi-directional as different component groups exert pressure to shape public policy. While this chapter has been primarily historical, in the next chapter I draw upon my ethnographic research to develop this argument, focusing more narrowly on the way agroecology has been adopted and adapted to meet the political contestations of marginal Cordobés.

Chapter Two

The Permeability of Córdoba Bodies

Introduction

In the previous chapter I suggested that the partisan infrastructure of Kirchnerism had deliberately facilitated the spread of agroecology. I pointed to investment in state agricultural technical services aimed at helping small-scale farmers, to the grants made by INTA for agroecological farmers through the ProHuerta program, and to the way in which state welfare has been increasingly administered through programs such as the SSC, which enabled the majority of my interlocutors to claim a salary through participation in community farming projects. I argued that facilitating such projects was a strategy of Kirchnerist power, which I suggest is inherently coalitional, and has found strength through linking itself to pre-existing grassroots social organisations. It is tempting to analyse such a situation through the lens of “environmentality” (cf. Agrawal 2005; Luke 1999; Li 2007; West 2006), in which powerful organisations, variously linked to state or capitalist power, are responsible for subjects’ environmental dispositions, agroecology would be understood as a mode of Kirchnerist governance. Instead, however, I focus on the local context through which agroecology has come to prominence and the way agroecology is creatively engaged with and put to use by my interlocutors in their pre-existing political struggles.

While the environmentality literature has certainly offered insights into the flow of power through environments, in this chapter I argue that it occludes as much as it illuminates with regard to the ways communities interact with environments. Michael Cepek draws upon extensive fieldwork in the Ecuadorian Amazon to challenge environmentality literature for what he sees as its proposing conservationists hold “a near-magical power” (2011, 501). Further, he argues, these readings do not account for how local organisations engage with environments in ways that not only do not conform to the environmental discourses of government or NGO bodies, but exceed them by taking a more expansive understanding of environments and community relations to environments. He writes: “Cofán people maintain a critical consciousness of the activities, sociality, equipment, and products of scientific conservation, and they view their participation in relation to their political aspirations and cultural background” (2011, 502). Although I am less sceptical of Foucauldian anthropology writ large than Cepek, I share his concerns regarding the blindness of environmentality literature to local conditions, especially pre-existing political commitments regarding environmental spaces, and how such conditions might alter the meaning of such environmentalisms for local people. As such, in this chapter I foreground the epistemological commitments and political contestations that shape the adoption of agroecology in Córdoba.

To do this, I discuss two landmark social movements, both occurring in Córdoba's peri-urban green belt, which have shaped the Argentine agroecological movement and Argentine environmental dispositions more generally.

My concern with environmentality literature is not only the lack of treatment it gives processes of change as environmental narratives traverse the globe, or even the problematic unidirectional flow from Global North to Global South that environmentality assumes. It is also about where social analysts should look to find politics as occurring. Environmentality literature – which, prior to being adopted by anthropologists, was initially developed by political scientists Timothy Luke (1999) and Arun Agrawal (2005) – looks to powerful organisations, variously linked with globalised capitalism, as the drivers of environmental politics. In this formulation, politics occurs on a structural level: “the political” is the manoeuvrings of power by states, international capital, and NGOs. By contrast, I suggest following the emic theorisation of politics as engaged in by Cordobés. Here, politics is not delimited to the structural (although Cordobés agroecologists had a keen understanding of their structural exclusion). Politics, for my interlocutors, was also distinctly interpersonal, and harms they suffered were theorised as having a direct causal relationship with another party's malfeasance.

In order to understand the emic environmental politics of Cordobés agroecologists I engage with a body of social scientific literature that moves past “conspiracy theory” as a pejorative term to analyse what conspiracism as a narrative form can tell us about subjects' political thought. Conspiracy theory speaks to both aspects of my argument against the analytic of environmentality as it 1) provides a useful descriptor of Argentine political culture; and 2) offers an analytic to understand how and where my interlocutors conceptualise politics as taking place.²² Timothy Melley (2002) suggests that “agency” is the often overlooked element in discussions of conspiracy theory. His work posits that conspiracism involves a concern for an agentive individualism being curtailed, or under attack, by a sinister force. Conspiracy theorising, he notes entails “[an] attempt to think sociologically about agency while simultaneously retaining a concept of the individual that is at odds with sociological work” (2003, 68). In line with my informants' theorisation of harm as attributable to individual actors, in this chapter I invert Melley's formulation while retaining his core insight of agency, to

²² Political anthropology has frequently turned to the figure of the witch as a means to analyse how gossip and rumour constitute political discourse. The narratives of harm that the agroecologists I worked with engaged in mirrored the hyper-causal logics associated with stories of witchcraft. However, following Luise White (2000), the social relations posited in my interlocutors' narratives do not fit the model of witchcraft. While witches are social intimates driven by malice, the internal divide in Argentine society is too deep to categorise the antagonists of my informants in these terms (as will become clear throughout this chapter). An analytic of conspiracy theory better captures the social relationship which exists between agroecologists and those who they see as causing them harm, while still describing logics of causality, culpability, and power.

understand conspiracy theorising as an attempt to think about politics in which agentive actors rather than sociological forces structure the social world.

Conspiracist thinking entails thinking through culpability and power through a hyper-causal logic. In the context of Córdoba's agroecologists, it enabled one-to-one-to-one relationships to be mapped out between environmental pollution, bodily harm, and agro-industrial producers. In the face of both economic marginalisation and susceptibility to toxic contamination, conspiracy theorising works to gather together the diffuse and ubiquitous causes of harm in such a way as to make attributing blame possible. Paying attention to the way in which my interlocutors enunciated agroecological principles through conspiracist logics is telling of the way in which globally circulating environmental narratives are adapted to local contexts and pressed into the service of pre-existing political disputes.

The direct harm which Cordobés agroecologists attribute to conventional producers is exacerbated by the broader set of cultural conceptions held by Argentines regarding the relationship between bodies and environments. Before exploring this dynamic, however, I will first overview the environmentality literature, and explain why it fails to accurately depict the process of localised environmental subjectivation.

Understanding environmentalisms

The inherently localised nature of ecological systems notwithstanding, environmental knowledges and movements have become a global affair. Arun Agrawal (2005) points to conservationist mindsets as being present in British administrators of colonial India, arguing that this conservationism was a constituent element of colonial rule. To make this argument, Agrawal builds upon Timothy Luke's model of environmentality (Luke 1999). Environmentality, as the name suggests, riffs on Foucault's notion of "governmentality" to describe "the simultaneous redefinition of the environment and the subject as such redefinition is accomplished through the means of political economy" (Agrawal 2005, 24). Locals – in this case under colonial and later post-colonial structures of governance – are subjectivised so as to serve as junior partners in the state's extractive management of the environment. Elsewhere Goldman, (2001) names this dynamic "eco-governmentality", whereas Tania Li (2007) and Paige West (2006) simply use the term "governmentality" where discussing the efforts of environmental NGOs.

Environmentality literature argues that powerful external bodies instil specific dispositions toward the environment within local people as a means to accomplish their own strategic ends.

Arun Agrawal describes this as making “environmental subjects”, leaving the subject population as one which imagines itself as a good environmental steward, and whose practice is in keeping with this environmentalist disposition. Agrawal identifies this dynamic as being promoted by colonial and post-colonial states in Himalayan India. Cori Hayden (2003) similarly uses the analytic to describe the sentiments of rural Mexican communities towards the natural world as shaped by international financial institutions and multi-lateral conventions. Tania Li sees governmentality in operation in NGOs’ incursions into highland Indonesia, where programs “aimed to produce new subjects who would adopt ecofriendly practices on their own land and respect park rules” (2007, 139). She reports that such programs failed, as farmers “did not have the luxury or incentive to prioritise long-term ecological stability” (2007, 137).

The way in which local communities’ relationships to environments is figured in this literature is contradicted by the work of other authors who have sought to foreground subaltern environmentalism. In critiquing the way environmentalist dispositions are forced by powerful – generally western – actors onto less powerful ones, such works implicitly cast receptive groups as “environmentally backwards” (Choy 2011, 6), not capable of developing an environmental politics of their own. While it is worthwhile to think through the way power circulates through environmentalism, environmentality literature risks further obscuration of the environmental suffering of marginalised groups.²³ As a result environmentality literature is somewhat tone deaf coming on the heels of the environmental justice political struggles that started in the 1980s and the academic literature of the 1990s. Environmental justice movements thoroughly demonstrated that poor and BIPOC communities disproportionately bear the toxic costs of industrial and agro-industrial production (Bullard 2000; Brown and Mikkelsen 2007; Taylor 2014), a dynamic that Auyero and Swinstun show is replicated in Argentina through an analysis of the myriad environmental hazards to which Buenos Aires’ shantytowns are exposed (2009).²⁴ Furthermore, Bullard is eager to note that such movements are generally indigenous to, and led by, the communities living with waste (2000).

In her work on Argentine anti-pollution movements, Florencia Arancibia suggests that analysts be attentive to the way in which “science works better for some groups than for others” (2013,

²³ Hayden’s environmental constructivist approach to showing the outcomes of ‘biodiversity’ being adopted by villagers as a means to conceptualize nature is an especially enlightening use of environmentality literature to think through power relations as occurring through environmental spaces.

²⁴ Following on from the work of authors like Bullard, a second generation of theorists studying pollution have worked to foreground local people’s quotidian experiences of living with toxicity, particularly thinking through the phenomenological experience of embodying pollution. Blanchette (2019) and Shapiro (2015) describe the means through which toxicity becomes entangled with both social and somatic elements of human experience. Shapiro points to bodily knowledge as a means of “attuning to the chemosphere”, a process in which “indistinct and distributed harms are sublimated into an embodied apprehension of human vulnerability to and entanglements with ordinary toxicity, provoking reflection, disquiet, and contestation” (2015, 369).

82). This work adds to the long-standing feminist and STS commitment to de-reifying scientific objectivity by demonstrating that categories of race, class, and gender affect the way bio-medical institutions treat the “credibility” of sufferers (Haraway 1988; Checker 2007; Goldstein and Hall 2015). Against such biases, members of polluted communities have begun to conduct their own studies of population health, and I discuss below one such study, the Córdoba *Madres de Ituzaingó* campaign. Brown and Mikkelsen name this practice “popular epidemiology” (1997, 153). Popular epidemiology foregrounds the socio-economic patterning of toxic vulnerability and aims to frame the experience of environmental suffering as explicitly political. Amelia Fiske (2020) argues that the asymmetric distribution of environmental suffering, and bio-medicine’s lack of engagement with this distribution, raise questions of not only environmental justice but also epistemological justice. The formalistic models of exposure that bio-medical models of toxicity use fail to account for the way in which toxins saturate the lived reality of marginalised peoples across the globe. Attending to the ways in which local people narrate their experiences of toxic exposure, Fiske argues, offers a counter to hegemonic, bio-medical discussions of risk; doing so suggests that toxicity be reconceptualised “not as a property of chemicals alone – but as emerging within particular relations between people and places” (Fiske 2020, 23).

A more recent body of literature that critically engages with “Anthropocene” and “climate change” concepts also presents problems for environmentality literature’s top-down, north–south reading of environmental dispositions. Scholars have demonstrated that marginalised groups experiencing the effects of ecological and climatic change make sense of and act to resist these changes in ways that emerge through their own long-standing cultural practices (Lederach 2017; Connell 2020; Jolly 2019). This is particularly the case with Indigenous and Pasifika theorists, many of whom position environmental dispositions within First Nations’ ontologies and historicise current climatic and ecological degradation as an extension and intensification of settler colonialism (Whyte 2017; Montoya 2017; Davis and Todd 2017). Writers working to promote marginalised peoples’ understandings of the environment also challenge the uni-directionality of assumptions about environmental knowledge and dispositions. For example, Stuart Kirsch details the ways in which ideas developed within the Pacific world aimed at dealing with climate change are as mobile as any other, and are increasingly being adopted by global multi-lateral institutions (2020).

A cursory look at agroecology in Argentina would be unlikely to challenge the analytic model with which environmentality authors work. Agroecology is a foreign import from the Global North. In Argentina it was initially promoted by European NGOs. More recently it has been

supported by the state, and agroecology does indeed serve to buttress the political power of its state promoters. Such a reading, however, would fail to take into account the environmental politics that Córdoba engaged in prior to agroecology's recent boom, the local understanding of environments that long pre-dates agroecology, and the way in which agroecology is creatively put to use to secure the political goals of rural and peri-urban Córdoba. In the following section, I locate the genesis of Córdoba agroecology's current popularity in two community-led disputes over toxic pollution.

Ituzaingó and Malvinas Argentinas

Two long-running community campaigns against industrial agriculture were central to the development of the environmental subjectivities of Córdoba agroecologists, as well as to the growth of agroecology in the province. These were the Madres de Ituzaingó campaign, and the struggle against Monsanto in Malvinas Argentinas. Through these two foundational moments by which Argentine agroecological thought has come to develop, we can begin to see concerns about clean environments as emerging from community-led movements concerned with the ecologies they inhabit. Only after these movements were already active would agroecological practices and sensibilities be adopted, retroactively confirming the concerns of residents. The directionality of this story challenges environmentality's notion of an external imposition of environmental dispositions and underlines the importance of attending to an emic politics of the environment.

Barrio Ituzaingó is a peri-urban township to the south-east of Córdoba capital. In 2001, it was home to roughly five thousand people, living in twelve hundred homes. After noticing the high concentration of women wearing *pañuelos* (headscarfs) to cover the baldness resulting from leukemia treatments, Sofía Gatica, a resident of Ituzaingó, began collecting data. Gatica went door to door to ask neighbours about their health problems, aggregating names, ages, addresses, and diagnoses (Godoy et. al. 2005). As well as the abnormal prevalence of leukemia in the community, she noted a high incidence of extreme allergic reactions, as well as high rates of birth defects and miscarriages.

A marginal community, the infrastructural development of which had been interrupted by the millennial economic crisis, Ituzaingó was not connected to the city electricity or water systems. The area adjacent to Ituzaingó was undergoing a process of increasing industrialisation: in 1997 the Ferreyra industrial park opened, comprising 55 hectares of factories, including some involved in heavy manufacturing. Concurrently, the farmlands surrounding the neighbourhood were also industrialised via a steady conversion to soy monoculture – a process that hastened

exponentially following the 1996 approval of genetically modified soy for commercial use in Argentina. As a result of the township's poor infrastructure and recent industrial development, the newly formed Madres de Ituzaingó – a small group of Ituzaingó residents, most of whom were young mothers – initially asked the provincial and municipal governments for assistance in determining the cause of their illnesses, and to provide necessary health resources. In 2002, the Madres petitioned the provincial health authorities to conduct studies of the Ituzaingó water system as well as investigate the health and environmental impacts of the electrical generator systems, pesticidal crop fumigation, and emissions from a meat-processing plant in the area (Berger 2013).

Attempts by the Madres group to secure government attention and aid were initially rebuffed, and throughout the campaign various levels of government would sometimes act as allies, sometimes as combatants to the Madres.²⁵ In response to the reluctance of the provincial government to investigate their concerns, the group adopted campaigning tactics popularised during the recent economic crisis. The Madres blockaded roads and conducted weekly marches through central Córdoba, finishing at the provincial legislature. Some of the Madres' demonstrations were met with violent repression by the provincial police, and the group used the media generated by their actions and by the disproportionate government response to garner popular support. When studies were eventually conducted in 2003, they showed the presence of heavy metals as well as agro-chemicals in the soil and water tanks of Ituzaingó (Torrado 2017). The Madres successfully lobbied to have the water infrastructure replaced, and, in 2004, to have a provincial law passed banning the use of agro-chemical fumigation in areas proximate to residential zones.²⁶

Despite the provincial ban being implemented in 2004, the community at Ituzaingó continued to experience disproportionately high incidences of serious illness. Although the early reports had shown that heavy metals as well as agro-chemicals were polluting the neighbourhood, the Madres pivoted to focus solely on industrial agriculture. They raised concerns about the long-term effects of agro-chemicals, which were still relatively novel technologies in Argentina during the Madres' campaign. Such concerns were exacerbated when, in 2006, studies revealed that of thirty children who presented with illnesses from Barrio Ituzaingó, twenty-three had detectable traces of agro-chemicals in their bloodstream (Berger 2013, 73). Agro-industrial pollution remained a live issue, not only due to its lingering effects but because even after a

²⁵ Berger (2013) provides a thorough history of the Madres de Ituzaingó campaign, and dedicates significant space for the Madres' engagement with various levels of government.

²⁶ (<https://www.argentina.gob.ar/normativa/provincial/ley-9164-123456789-0abc-defg-461-9000ovorpyel/actualizacion>)

ban on residential-area fumigation had been enacted, it was regularly ignored by producers and poorly enforced by the provincial government. This changed, however, in 2012, when the Madres won a landmark case in the provincial courts, in which a soy producer, Francisco Parra, and an aerial-fumigation pilot, Edgardo Pancello, were convicted of unsafe fumigation, and both given three-year suspended sentences involving community service (La Voz 2017). The convictions were historic in that they represented the first convictions for such a crime in Latin America.²⁷

As Ituzaingó was making headlines for the successful conviction of agro-industrial producers, the then president, Cristina Fernández de Kirchner, announced a deal had been struck with Monsanto to build a seed processing plant in another peri-urban Córdoba locale: Malvinas Argentinas. Like Ituzaingó, Malvinas Argentinas is an economically impoverished enclave of Córdoba, it is not connected to the gas network, and lacks paved roads. The announcement of the factory was framed by Fernández de Kirchner, Monsanto, and by the project's local supporters as an investment that would bring much needed jobs and infrastructure to the municipality.

Despite the promise of funds to Malvinas Argentinas, in the context of the heightened apprehension of industrial agriculture caused by the Madres case there was scepticism about the true costs that might be incurred by courting Monsanto. The specificities of the development were somewhat sidelined as the debate became about Monsanto itself, rather than a discussion of the dangers the seed-processing plant might pose. The French exposé, *The World According to Monsanto* (2008), which documents the organisation's many misdealings, was popularly shared between neighbours. Anti-Monsanto activists organised public assemblies, to which expert speakers were invited to discuss industrial agriculture as a model. When the plant's specificities were discussed by Malvinenses it was often in broad terms of agro-industrial pollution. Residents voiced concerns that water used in washing the seeds would be contaminated and recycled into Malvinas Argentinas' water reserves, which, when I visited the township, locals proudly told me belonged to an underground aquifer connected to the Andes. Others were worried the plant's placement was too close to a neighbourhood school, and that contaminants could travel on the breeze, affecting the children's health.

Resistance to the proposed factory was organised internally by the community and also by environmentalists and public health advocates travelling from other parts of Córdoba as well

²⁷ An appeal in 2020 led to the acquittal of both convicted.

as from further afield in Argentina. The Madres of Ituzaingó would come to play a prominent role in lifting the profile of the residents' concerns and connecting Malvinense activists with medical professionals. Starting in August 2012, activists organised roadblocks. In 2013, the group decided to set up a permanent camp, prohibiting workers from entering the lot Monsanto had purchased for the project. As had occurred in Ituzaingó, protesters faced violent repression by the provincial police, as well as from UOCRA, the union representing construction workers in Córdoba. Proponents of the plant's construction suggested the activists were outsiders to Malvinas Argentinas (Ludeuña 2017). While the movement did include activists who had travelled to the municipality, resistance was certainly popular among Malvinenses. A survey of residents conducted by CONICET (Argentina's national science body) found that 73.3 percent of Malvinenses surveyed supported the actions of the protestors (Mazzalay et al., 2014). The same survey showed that 90.6 percent of interviewees supported a referendum in Malvinas Argentinas regarding the plant's installation, and that, were voting mandatory, 64.8 percent would vote against it, while only 21.7 percent would vote in favour of the plant's construction (Mazzalay et al. 2014).

Alongside the activists' roadblocks, the struggle against Monsanto's development in Malvinas Argentinas was being litigated in the courts. The overwhelming support for a referendum was contrasted with the lack of public consultation Malvinenses felt had occurred in the planning process and, in 2012, a group of residents started a legal action against the municipal government for its failure to produce an environmental impact study and community consultation process prior to authorizing construction (Ludeuña 2017). This, the residents claimed, was in violation of the 2002 national *Ley General del Ambiente* (Ley 25.675). While the activists lost this action, appeals and fights in other courts continued, and in 2014 the provincial labour courts ordered a halt to construction until the municipal government could produce an environmental impact study. Following this, activists slowly left the camp site, with only a handful staying until 2016, when it became known that Monsanto had initiated attempts to sell the site. In this same year, Daniel Arzani, the former head of the municipal government, and Luis Bocco, the former provincial secretary for the environment, were charged by the national anti-corruption body with abuse of power for authorising the project (La Voz 2016). The pair have since been acquitted.

The case of Madres de Ituzaingó and the struggle against Monsanto in Malvinas Argentinas have become agroecological lore in Córdoba. Both are cited as raising the public consciousness with regard to the potential dangers of industrial agriculture, not only among those Cordobés living in peri-urban areas susceptible to poisoning by crop-spraying, but also

among the broader population concerned with the presence of chemicals in the food they purchase. Both events were pointed to by my interlocutors as having led to the growth of agroecology in Córdoba; in the case of Malvinas Argentinas, the link was direct, with Huerta Maipú developing directly out of the campaign in the neighbouring municipality. In contrast to the model of top-down environmentality, it is noteworthy that both these events were community led movements resisting industrial agriculture, and, as I discuss in the following section, were based in localised understandings of the relationship between environments and bodies.

Hecha la ley, hecha la trampa

While my interlocutors in Maipú often mentioned the corruption charges that had been filed against the Malvinense officials, they did not see the case as out of the ordinary, and here I turn to the literature on conspiracy theorising to discuss the place of mistrust in Argentine political culture. Conspiracy aptly describes the socio-cultural milieu in which Cordobés agroecologists operate. Argentines routinely, and almost boastfully, describe a sense of generalised suspicion as being present in their interactions. Didier Fassin describes conspiracy theories as indicating a breach in a society's "cognitive consensus" which "reveal deep divisions in society" (2011, 40). The polarisation and generalised suspicion that Fassin alludes to is a defining characteristic of Argentine public life. While suggestions of a "conspiratorial culture" may seem overly generalising, the dearth of public *communitas* has been noted by various theorists of Argentina (D'Avella 2014; Grimson and Kessler 2005; Jusionyte 2015). Sarah Muir goes so far as to suggest that a national belonging has been constituted around what she calls a sense of "total corruption" (2016), in which Argentines suspect not only their politicians, but their friends and neighbours and even themselves of corrupt dealings. Such a sense of total corruption is popularly expressed through idioms such as "hecha la ley, hecha la trampa" (a law is made, a trick is made), a phrase that communicates the public self-diagnosis of an Argentine propensity for finding loopholes wherever possible.

In peri-urban and rural Argentina, agroecology has gained popularity as a means of theorising latent bodily harm, it was not unusual for my interlocutors to undertake such theorisation in explicitly conspiracist terms. An agroecological social organiser with a degree in agronomy shared a video on Facebook, originally published by an aspiring social influencer based in Miami, Florida. The video shows a flow of water, purportedly being influenced by 5G transmissions, seeming to defy gravity and tessellating into a triangular stream as it falls to the ground. Soon after a switch is flipped and the water begins to flow upwards. This post was accompanied by a suggestion that the social organiser's friends reflect on how the placement

of 5G antennas might affect the water inside their bodies. I was told by a member of a different agroecological collective that vaccines regularly cause autism in children. The state has been unable to intervene in this situation, he explained, due to the power of big pharmaceutical companies, which, he claimed, also actively suppress information regarding non-commercial medicines. He cited the suppression of information about the healing power of plants as an example. In a variation on this theme, a construction worker who turned to agroecological farming upon inheriting a property from his father told me that it is chemicals used in common pesticides that are responsible for autism in children. In Malvinas Argentinas, a former anti-Monsanto activist informed me that the company is part of the vast holdings of the Rothschild family, who, he added, are Jews.²⁸

These narratives are easily recognisable as conspiracy theories, globally circulating ideas, which have been taken on by my interlocutors with very little adaptation. It is their familiarity, rather than any internal, qualitative characteristic, that marks them as distinguishable from more mainstream Argentine thinking. In the growing body of literature that explores conspiracy theory, authors caution against drawing stark distinctions between “conspiracy theories” and more socially legitimate sets of beliefs (Fassin 2011; Perlman and Machold 2011; Mathur 2015). More specifically Argentine discourses retain many of the same narrative tropes found in globally circulating theories. In October 2020 the Artigas Project was launched in Argentina by a group of “social movements, legal and communication professionals, and environmentalists, mobilised in the search for truth, justice, and the common good” (<https://www.proyectoartigas.ar/>). The project brought together Juan Grabois, the leader of CTEP, and Dolores Etchevehere, a member of a prominent agricultural family who claimed to have been cheated out of her inheritance. The project aimed to uncover the illegal dealings within the Etchevehere family, highlighting Dolores’ claims that her brothers and mother have conspired to deny her an inheritance. Dolores Etchevehere granted the Artigas Project 40 percent of her (potential) land for agroecological farming, and farmers brought together through CTEP quickly began to occupy these properties. The project was most interested in the supposed crimes of Luis Miguel Etchevehere, the conspiracy’s supposed ringleader who was also president of the Sociedad Rural Argentina, as well as minister for agriculture in the Macri government. Dolores Etchevehere accused her brother of heading a criminal network of industrial agriculturalists engaged in fraud, extortion, labour violations and drug-trafficking.

Public theorising about illicit motivations is often directed at political opponents. Pelkmans and Machold describe the practice of conspiracy theorising as a form of “street realpolitik” (2011,

²⁸ For a thorough discussion of anti-Semitism in Argentina see (Faulk 2012) or (McGee Deutsch 2018)

72). This wonderfully evocative term encapsulates the situated and evaluative nature of the practice, in which knowledge about “family backgrounds, economic activities, and political connections of people involved in major political and economic deals and scandals” (2011, 71) is drawn upon in order to understand the workings of power beyond unreliable official accounts. Evaluations of a political enemies’ involvement in conspiracy is often centred upon, or invokes, collusion with the military junta. An MCC member and local Kirchnerist councilman in northern Córdoba critiqued Mauricio Macri as anti-national, telling me that his family had enriched themselves by providing services to the dictatorship. The shadow of military rule also hung long in another MCC activist’s accusations against a doctor who stood as a Macri-aligned candidate in the 2019 provincial elections. The activist suggested the doctor had been telling mothers that their infants had died in childbirth, before selling the still-living babies to wealthy families, a practice that mirrors some of the most atrocious crimes of the military dictatorship of 1976 to 1983, in which the children of “disappeared” political prisoners were removed from their parents and raised by allies of the regime. Although extreme, such claims are hardly on the fringe of Argentine discourse. In an extraordinary personal attack in response to sustained negative coverage during her presidency, Cristina Fernández de Kirchner brought into question the parentage of the adopted children of the director of the right-wing newspaper *Clarín*, suggesting they had been gifted to the family after being removed by the military government from murdered political activists (Dembroucke 2014).

That agroecology should be surrounded by such “street realpolitik” is unsurprising, given the long-standing partisanship regarding Argentina’s integration into global food markets. Internal development measures entailing industrial protectionism and migration restrictions – as opposed to relatively open borders favouring large agricultural interests – have caused definitive cleavages in Argentine politics since at least the late 1800s (Rock 2002). Moreover, these alternative models of development have mapped against diametrically opposed, racialised understandings of Argentinidad as discussed in the previous chapter. In what Neal Richardson calls “export-oriented populism” (2009), the Kirchner governments initially attempted to win support from agricultural interests as well as the Peronists’ traditional support base of the urban workers. Forging this unusual coalition entailed continuing Menem-era policies of promoting soy export while simultaneously taxing exports more aggressively than Menem had, in order to fund more expansive welfare policies. Richardson notes that as soy is not domestically consumed, its export did not affect workers’ cost-of-living expenses (2009, 228).

A Kirchnerist coalition that included agricultural interests was, however, short lived. As Argentina reeled from the effects of the global financial crisis, the new government of Cristina Fernández de Kirchner sought to expand state revenues from agro-industry and take advantage of the historically high prices of commodities on international markets. In 2008, the government suggested an export-tax reform that included a proposal to institute a floating taxation rate on soy, determined by international prices – at its highest, when exports attracted more than US\$600 per tonne, the retention rate would have been 95 percent (Reinke 2020). This move sparked a conflict with the agricultural sector, resulting in four months of agricultural industrial action, beginning with a strike on sales of meat and grains, followed by protests in cities and towns, and blockades set up on major roads throughout the nation. Córdoba, a province deep in the country's soy belt, was the scene of many of these clashes. Counter-protests were organised by supporters of the president, and again the question of parties' involvement with the former dictatorship were invoked. For instance, the *Movimiento Evita*, a Kirchner-aligned organisation, handed out flyers entitled *La Sociedad Rural Celebra el Golpe Militar* (The Rural Society Celebrates the Coup d'Etat), accompanied by a historical newspaper clipping reporting the organisation – Argentina's most powerful agricultural interest group – congratulating the military government on a successful first year in power.²⁹

Under the Macri regime agriculture remained hyper-partisan. Macri presented himself as a president for the campo, and his government catered to industrial agriculture promising cuts to export taxes. While president, Mauricio Macri personally critiqued a ruling by a provincial judge in Entre Ríos as "irresponsible" and "putting at risk the jobs of many entrerrianos" (Página 12 2019); the ruling had banned agricultural pesticide from being applied within one kilometre of schools, three kilometres if applied aerially. For my interlocutors, the Macri government's approach to agriculture was deeply personal. Cuts to the *Monotributo Social Agropecuario* (a social support fund in which the contributions of enrolled small-scale farmers were matched by the federal state) put in jeopardy access to health care and retirement benefits for many of the agroecologists with whom I worked. Similarly, the Macri regime gutted the *Secretaría de Agricultura Familiar*, the state body responsible for providing technical assistance to small farmers. This body had worked to promote agroecology in Argentina, and many of my interlocutors either received aid from SAF technicians or worked directly for the organisation. It was reported that during early negotiations for an IMF loan, Macri attempted to maintain an election commitment to lowering taxes on the export sector, despite the IMF insisting that

²⁹ The proposal, known as 'resolution 125', would eventually be defeated in the senate. When the vice-president was called upon to cast a tie-breaking vote, he voted "not positive".

retentions be kept in place. While Macri did capitulate to this demand, much was made by agroecologists, particularly MCC activists, of this seemingly lopsided approach to agriculture.

Political culture in Argentina is characterised by polarisation, by a breached “cognitive consensus”. Mistrust and ill-will are not only present at the level of electoral politics, but mark Argentines’ quotidian assessments of other Argentines’ intentions. This breach is as pronounced in discussions of agriculture as it is in any domain of Argentine political-life, if not more so. The conspiracy theorising which agroecologists engage in are an outcome of such suspicions and partisanship. Conspiracy is not simply a useful descriptor, however, and in the following section I put conspiracy to work as an analytic to understand the way in which agroecological discourse is marshalled into pre-existing political conflicts.

The permeability of Córdoba bodies

As well as being a useful descriptor of Argentine political culture, conspiracy functions as an analytic through which I explicate Córdoba agroecologists’ experience and narration of the harms they suffer. In this section I will begin to map the workings of conspiracist thinking, before turning to Argentine theorisations of the relationship between bodies and environments.

Conspiracist thought, at its most basic, entails the apportioning of blame. To be a conspiracy theorist is to believe that events unfolding are doing so by the design of some group of actors whose interests and influence are being occluded from anyone outside of the conspiracy. Returning to the work of Timothy Melley (2002), who I discussed in the introduction of this chapter, conspiracist thinking means centring agency in conceptualising how the social world works; we might add that for those who believe themselves to be suffering due to a conspiracy, it means understanding harm through a prism of agency. Skip Willman (2002) contrasts conspiracy theory with what he calls “contingency theory,” an approach to understanding events in which history simply unfolds randomly. Willman explains that contingency theory is deeply conservative, particularly in the United States context in which he writes, as it dismisses sociological structures which pattern power and suffering and in doing so supports the status quo. If contingency theory denies causality, conspiracy theory is hyper-causal (cf. Fenster 1999). Ingrid Walker Fields argues that conspiracy theorizing asserts “a desire for direct causality and accountability, suggesting that we wish to believe someone, some group, is responsible for the way things are” (2002, 158). Working with colonial records from East Africa, Luise White (2000) suggests that the rumours of the vampiric practices of government officials were more convincing accounts of the colonial experience than firsthand testimonies because they foregrounded causality and offered an explanation as to why otherwise incomprehensible

events were occurring. Conspiracy and rumour highlight causality and power relations in their explanations of events. It is this same sense of hyper-causality runs through Cordobés agroecologists' theorisations of the relationship between environmental pollution and bodily harm, and in turn, through their assessments of culpability for this harm.

The experience of being a body – and as such the way bodily harm is experienced – varies cross-culturally. Phenomenologists have long been interested in the cultural life of bodies. Maurice Merleau-Ponty states that the body is “our general means of having a world” (2012, 147). It is at once the seat of all human experience, and at the same time thoroughly cultural, made up by those same experiences. Anthropologists drawing upon Merleau-Ponty have explicated the ways in which being a body in the world is culturally mediated. Brad Weiss (1997) underlines that all phenomenological experience occurs within specific, situated contexts, and, as such, “bodiliness” can only be understood through attention to cultural forms. He uses his work with the Haya of Tanzania to illustrate this, pointing to ontological concerns of bodies' integrity and partibility as fundamentally structuring the practice of bodiliness. That the body is not cross-culturally a discrete bounded unit is also taken up by Katie Glaskin (2012). Working in north-western Australia with the Bardi and Jawi Indigenous peoples, Glaskin writes: “Embodied relationality encompasses not just people, but places, species, and ancestral beings; it is a relationship between persons and places regarded as consubstantial, and that has consequences for how people, and people and country, are linked through space and time” (2012, 298). Harm to those things with which one is consubstantial is in turn subjectively experienced at referent points in Bardi and Jawi bodies. Anthropologists working on issues of toxicity have further underlined that concerns of embodiment do not end at the skin (Blanchette 2019; Fiske 2018). In the marginal barrio of Mexico City where Elizabeth Roberts (2017) conducted fieldwork, toxic odours at once fortified and permeated boundaries – on the one hand keeping a potentially violent police presence out of the neighbourhood, while on the other, forming hazardous entanglements with residents' bodies. Nicholas Shapiro describes being a living body as “becoming sensitive, embodying atmospheres, somatically judging environments, or becoming corporeally aware of nonhumans” (2015, 369). Through built-up, recurring experiences of toxic exposure, Shapiro argues, bodily knowledge processes become “sublimated into an embodied apprehension of human vulnerability to and entanglements with ordinary toxicity” (2015, 369) as humans “attune to the chemosphere” in which they find themselves.

The permeability of bodies to their *entorno* – to what they eat and where they live – is a long-standing concern in Argentina. While Marshall Sahlins may have argued that the

transcendence of the Abrahamic God and early Christianity's contempt for Paganisms led to a uniquely western separation of nature and humanity (1996), such a separation does not seem to hold in Catholic Latin America. Rebecca Earle's (2012) work shows that from the moment of the Spanish invasion of the Americas, colonists were concerned about the impact of New World environments and foods on conquistadors' bodies. Inputs into bodies figured variously as being literally capable of transfiguring bodies; as affecting morality and character; and as important in determining legal-racial categories (Earle 2012). In Argentina, from the 1860s Lamarckian evolutionary theory, which suggests evolution through individual organism's adaptation to environments within their lifetimes, took hold among prominent liberal thinkers, and remained influential into the early twentieth century (Novoa 2007; Pite 2018). A degree of Lamarckian thinking remains perceptible in agroecological thought, particularly with regards to plants' adaptation to local conditions - as the biology of plants is said to be shaped by the ecosystems in which they are raised.

A sense of indistinction between bodies and the ecologies in which they live is fundamental to agroecological thought in Argentina. Humans are said to influence their environments, and in turn environments influence humans. Agroecology is an example of what Kath Weston (2017) calls bio-intimacy, which she describes as a perception "in which bodies and ecologies are not distinct....in a certain sense bodies are their environments, and vice versa" (2017, 79). For agroecologists, the relationship between themselves and the ecologies they inhabit is a co-constitutive one, a case of intra- rather than inter-relatedness.

Such intra-relationality can be generative and symbiotic. When I asked, agroecologists did not see any sense in distinguishing the health-giving from environmentalist elements within agroecology. At an open day for agroecological farming, the speaker, an agronomy student, described the "four M's" of agroecology: "*mierda, minerales, microorganismos, y mente*" (shit, minerals, micro-organisms, and minds). These, the speaker explained, are the four elements necessary for plant growth. He emphasised that the last inputs, "minds," meant "our labour, our minds," and stated that mental energy dedicated to agroecological practice was valuable as "public knowledge, we cannot lose it. Monsanto can't come and say this [these techniques] is ours." In turn, agroecological matter is understood as life-giving. At a workshop on the medicinal uses of plants, run through the MCC's storefront in central Córdoba, participants were asked to identify and group the symptom relieving properties of various plants that could substitute for pharmaceutical treatments, as part of a *botequín natural* (natural pharmacy). At this event the organizer neatly summed the symbiosis agroecologists understand themselves

as having with the areas they cultivate, stating: “It’s about helping the plant. I help the plant, it helps me, we collaborate.”



Figure 2: Workshop participants arrange the names of plants by their medicinal effects at the MCC storefront

The intra-relationality of environments and bodies can just as easily be destructive for agroecologists. Raúl, fifty-one, who operated one of the largest agroecological farms in the southern end of Córdoba's cinturón verde, was particularly keen to communicate the embodied experiences associated with foods produced by different agricultural models. In keeping with the use of the *botequín natural*, Raúl explained to me that “When we really nourish ourselves (*alimentarnos realmente*), with healthy and strong foods that have the force of the earth and the cosmos, we feel ourselves strong and healthy.” He contrasted this with conventionally produced agriculture: “*Veneno* (poison [the term agroecologists typically use to refer to pesticides]) *es hecho por la muerte* (is made for death), not for life. And it generates disruption (*trastorno*) in human beings ... they say we are only what we eat.” He followed this by stressing the effect such pesticides can have not only on the body, but on social relations: “There have been too many poisons and chemicals sprayed. And this has generated social problems; I believe it has generated the conflicts that happen in families in the city, [the conflicts] come from agriculture with poisons.” Rhetorically, he posed the question: “Why is it that someone who consumes agriculture with poisons goes around all disturbed (*transtornado*) in life?” Raúl

explained he was speaking from experience. Until the early 2000s he had worked the property conventionally. In this period his son had fallen sick and eventually died, which Raúl attributed to his own application of agro-chemicals. This in turn precipitated the breakdown of his marriage.

For agroecologists, relationships between environments and bodies have far-reaching impacts on human lives; these impacts could be positive if the collaborative, agroecological model was followed, or toxic if the model of industrial agriculture dominated. As I discuss the “collaboration” between people and plants, and the place of agency in conspiracy theorising, it is necessary to speak also of the potential agency of more than human actors. No interlocutor ever described plants or any other materials involved in the agroecological process to me as an “actor” or “agentive”. Attributions of agency to such things were, however, ubiquitous – plants’ intentionality was even discussed, although with far less frequency. Agroecologists described the plants and soil with which they worked in terms that mirrored those found in works by authors such as Bruno Latour (2005b), Jane Bennet (2010) and Anna Tsing (2015). Readers familiar with Kath Weston’s work will recognise her term “bio-intimacy”, not as describing an ontological reality but rather a disposition she has noted developing in activist and academic circles, and sometimes called neo-animism. While agro-industrial materials and landscapes were definitely understood by Cordobés agroecologists as having an effect on the world, they were not conceived of as actors in the same manner. In contrast to agroecological materials, the things of industrial agriculture were lifeless. Note the asymmetry in Raúl’s discussion of agroecological goods and agro-chemicals – the former are imbued with celestial forces; the latter are both made and applied by people. Although it was possible to discuss with my interlocutors the concept and practice of “collaboration” with agroecologically grown plants, such a relationship, or any other that implied that industrial-agricultural inputs had a life of their own, would have been senseless for agroecologists.

As agency could not lie with lifeless agro-chemicals, Argentine agroecologists looked elsewhere for attributing responsibility for the harms suffered as a result of living in toxic landscapes – rather than conceive of such harm as structural, resulting from industrial agriculture writ large, my interlocutors engaged in a personalisation of blame, attributing culpability to producers as individuals. Individual producers (that is, individual producers as a category of people, rather than specific, named agriculturalists) were held in contempt by the Cordobés agroecologists with whom I worked. In an interview I conducted shortly before finishing fieldwork my informant expressed the view that: “With the other model [conventional agriculture] we don’t have much time left for life. Maybe some people can save themselves,

those with the most money will be able to, but the common population as always are the ones who will suffer.” Such apocalyptic thinking was not only a matter-of-fact statement about ecological crisis placed at the feet of industrial agriculture, it also was a moral commentary on the injustice that the same producers responsible for suffering would be the individuals able to personally avoid it due to the privileges which their anti-social wealth afforded them. Another interlocutor made this clear, casting agroecologists such as himself against such producers: “It’s a constant struggle, and a really complex task, because it’s a struggle against people with a lot of power.”

The personalisation of agroecologists’ critique of conventional production was present, too, in the particularly Argentine idioms in which such criticism was expressed. In both the case of the Madres de Ituzaingó and the campaign against Monsanto in Malvinas Argentinas the promoters of industrial agriculture were labelled “*Genocidios*”, a term in Argentine Spanish associated with the perpetrators of the crimes against humanity undertaken by the last military dictatorship. At an MCC event I attended in the north of the province, the speaker, a woman in her early forties, similarly used Argentine political idioms to personalise the struggle against industrial agriculture. To conclude her speech, she cried out: “*Ni un metro menos*” (Not one metre less), before reading out a list of names of rural communities that had been dislodged by industrial agriculture. After each name was read, the audience was invited to call back “*Presente!*” (present). “*Ni un metro menos*”, had been adopted from “*Ni una menos*” (Not one woman less), the slogan of the Argentine feminist movement’s protests condemning the prevalence of femicides in the nation. Likewise, the convention of reading a name to which an audience calls back “*Presente*” is a trope in Argentine political speech to commemorate the victims of the last dictatorship’s program of disappearances.

Metaphors equating conventional farmers with the perpetrators of murder, torture, and disappearances were apt, for agroecologists, in the context of the very real harm that was experienced by people living alongside sites of industrial agriculture. Perhaps the most tragic case I heard of during my fieldwork was relayed to me by Luis:

This happened in Córdoba, last year, it would have to be 2018. A girl, approximately nine years old, between nine and eleven, she was on her way to school to study, and she lived in a rural area where there are farms. And well, all those farms, all the fruit they produce in that area is conventional production. Or, when we say that its conventional, we’re saying that all the vegetables and fruit, they spray it. They pass over with planes and they spray it with agrochemicals. And yeah. The story is that, that

girl who was on her way to school cut a mandarin and ate it. This was between about eight and nine in the morning. And by twelve, by midday, she had died. Because she had ingested this mandarin, with agro-chemicals.

Later, when I tried to find more details regarding Luis' story, I was stunned by how accurately he had reported what to me had seemed like hyperbole. While a few details were off –the event had taken place in Corrientes, rather than Córdoba, the agrochemicals had not been applied by aerial fumigation – the tragedy was, in substance, as Luis had described. The girl had eaten a mandarin, treated with carbofuran – a pesticide banned in Argentina due to its toxicity – and died almost immediately. When I refer to conspiracy theory in this chapter, I do not do so to diminish the gravity of agrochemical use for rural and peri-urban living people in Argentina. These populations are exposed to an array of chemical pollutants used in the process of an extractive industry. Conspiracism, rather than describing paranoia, here can function as an analytic to understand the causal lines being drawn by my informants. It is through conspiracist thinking that one-to-one-to-one relationships can be mapped out between environmental pollution, bodily harm, and agro-industrial producers. Such thinking works to gather together the diffuse and ubiquitous causes of harm in such a way as to make attributing blame possible. In enabling participants to apportion blame, conspiracy theorizing functions as a profoundly political narrative form. The distribution of blame is inherently a political project, and rather than the form of politics theorised by environmentality, here environmental politics is occurring on an interpersonal level, voiced through local idioms, and in reference to local conditions. In the next section I will explore the way in which both agroecology, and the conspiracist thinking that surrounds it are put to work in achieving my interlocutors' political goals.

Putting agroecology to work

Conspiracy theorising formed part of an array of techniques for making moral arguments which agroecologists enunciated in order to further their political goals. Often political disputes related to questions of land-use, and usually they predated subjects' adoption of agroecology. In this final section of the chapter, I explore the ways in which agroecology has been creatively put to service by marginal Cordobés to further these political projects. By attending to the diverse narratives my informants used to discuss the socio-economic and ecological situation in which they lived, I foreground modes of political action which exceed the environmental-dispositions expected by the environmentality literature. I start by exploring the way in which speculation about power functions in Argentina as a tool for attaining popular support for a cause, before turning to the way in which my interlocutors discursively position themselves as agroecologists vis-à-vis both conventional and organic producers.

Political anthropology has become attuned to the discursive power of speculation in the quotidian politics of subaltern actors. Perhaps most famously, James Scott implores social analysts to “enter the world of rumour, gossip, disguises, linguistic tricks, metaphors” if we are to understand the “undeclared ideological guerrilla war” (1990, 137) waged by those resisting domination. Similarly, Niko Besnier (2009) points directly to gossip as a powerful means of engaging in politics. In the face of “total corruption,” and an extremely opaque state, Argentines, perhaps more than most, engage in public theorising to make sense of, and contest, their political reality. In the northern province of Misiones, Ieva Jusionyte (2016) developed the notion of “Crimecraft” in order to discuss how media stories are co-created through public speculation. The ongoing impunity of state forces, and memories of their own repression during the dictatorship, have forced journalists in Argentina to largely continue the “code of silence” policy regarding abuses committed by members of the police and armed forces. The citizen audience is then relied upon to fill plot holes through publicly theorising about state involvement in the open forums of media websites. Crime narratives, and public assessments of crime, are then dialectically produced in Argentina through journalists’ silences and citizens’ speculations. Public theorising is similarly a potent political tool in Buenos Aires. There, Nicholas D’Avella (2019) argues, open speculation about corruption in urban planning enabled residents’ groups to challenge the city government’s formalistic claim that planning codes were the result of democratic decision making. Through political gossip residents were able to feel out the political and commercial interests driving supposedly democratic decision making. D’Avella notes that speculation not only elucidated the workings of power, but was an effective tool in challenging them, as “gossip driven speculations” (2019, 175) helped to garner media attention and ultimately the political leverage the group had previously lacked.

Adopting the literal meaning of conspiracy theorising, rather than the pejorative meaning that social theorists have sought to eschew, it would be hard to suggest that the gossip and speculation of Jusionyte’s or D’Avella’s interlocutors was anything but conspiracist. These Argentines were engaged in public theorising about the workings of state and corporate power hidden from them. Various scholars of conspiracy theory (Fenster 1999; Mathur 2015; Hellinger 2003) have posited the phenomenon as a response to anti-democratic, non-inclusive politics. Mathur (2015) views conspiracy theorising as the creation of potentially counter-hegemonic narratives based upon subjectively located experience. She points to the means through which Himalayan Indian explanations of biodiversity loss push back against a depoliticising science to indict distant state officials.

As with their co-nationals in Buenos Aires and Misiones, the speculation of Córdoba agroecologists also entailed counter-hegemonic narratives based in subjectively located experience. This experience had taught agroecologists that industrial agriculture receives the backing of municipal, provincial, and federal governments – including in cases where the law should protect environmental activists. Mauricio Berger (2013) notes that even prior to the achievements of the Madres' de Ituzaingó campaign there were institutional and juridical frameworks that theoretically regulated agro-chemical fumigation – frameworks up to and including the national Constitution. Not only have such regulations failed to be imposed, Berger claims, but in fact state power in Córdoba has been consistently deployed against citizens attempting to ensure such frameworks are followed – as seen in the police repression of protests at Ituzaingó and Malvinas Argentinas.

In theorising the relationship between state power and industrial agriculture, my interlocutors spoke not simply of an institutional closeness, but of direct agreements between parties. Such theorisation echoes the personalisation of industrial agriculture more broadly, as discussed above. Despite being well-versed in their own structural disadvantage Córdoba agroecologists still regularly hypothesised about the individual parties whose corruption was causal to their environmental suffering. The incomplete environmental impact assessment that would ultimately undo plans for Monsanto's development at Malvinas Argentinas was discussed incessantly by my interlocutors, who speculated about the bribes that had been paid to gain approval. The Artigas Project aimed to uncover the inter-familial crimes of the former Macri-government minister and head of the Sociedad Rural Argentina. My informants would regularly hypothesise on the personal linkages with President Macri that may have enabled certain business deals; it was rarely lost on them that Macri's own family had greatly profited from privatisations during the Menem-era due to their close relationship with the administration. These speculations mirror the description of conspiracist thought laid out by Gordon Wood (1982). In his analysis of conspiracy and paranoid thought in the eighteenth-century Atlantic world, Wood writes: "[Conspiracism] presumes a world of autonomous, freely acting individuals who are capable of directly and deliberately bringing about events through their decisions and actions, and who thereby can be held morally responsible for what happens" (1982, 409). Conspiracist narratives such as those engaged in by my interlocutors are a fundamentally moralising engagement with the social world, in which each felt effect has a direct and deliberate cause.

Conspiracism was not the only discursive strategy Córdoba agroecologists made use of to indict the morality of other producers; framing themselves as uniquely promoting food

sovereignty similarly established a moralising, dichotomous relationship with other producers. As with agroecology itself (Norder et. al. 2016), the concept of food sovereignty, which has become tied to agroecology in global discourse, is highly malleable. The United Nations special rapporteur, Olivier de Schutter, has repeatedly suggested that agroecology is the means to achieve food sovereignty (TNI 2014). At the Rio +20 United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development, presentations from scientific research bodies similarly stressed this relationship (i.e. Altieri et. al. 2012). Miguel Altieri, a prominent Chilean agroecologist, defines food sovereignty as: “the right of each nation or region to maintain and develop their capacity to produce basic food crops with the corresponding productive and cultural diversity” (2009, 104). Generally credited as responsible for the concept of food sovereignty, La Vía Campesina acknowledge the polysemy of the term, writing: “Food Sovereignty is a process that adapts to the people and places where it is put in practice” (European Coordination Vía Campesina 2018, 1). Working on agroecology in Bolivia, Jenny Cockburn notes the semiotic breadth of food sovereignty, and tracks the way the Morales government has stretched the term to include any agricultural practice that promotes the state’s economic interests (2014). Marc Edelman suggests that such linkages between food sovereignty and states’ economic nationalism may have always been present. He challenges La Vía Campesina’s claims to have first developed the concept, pointing towards an alternative genealogy in which food sovereignty emerges not from peasant movements, but from the nationalist policies of the 1980s Mexican state (2014).

Food sovereignty features not only in macro-level politics; in Córdoba food sovereignty discourse is adopted and redeployed in ways which serves and extends the pre-existing political commitments of my interlocutors. In the north and west of the province, the MCC had initially formed in the late 1990s to contest the increasing concentration of land tenure prompted by the expansion of industrial agriculture. Campesino families were structurally disadvantaged in these disputes due to both the economic power of cattle ranchers and the insecure land tenure of use-rights arrangements under which many producers held some or all of their land. On multiple occasions MCC members described an assumed alliance between large producers and local judges as a “mafia” or “the most powerful mafia in the world,” due to the frequency of rulings against campesinos in land disputes.

In contrast to these anti-social “mafias,” agroecological farming was working towards food sovereignty; in contrast engaging in industrial agriculture was to be working against food sovereignty and by extension was to be anti-national. My interlocutors depicted industrial agriculture as almost exclusively destined for foreign food markets, and likewise, depicted large scale producers as being more emotionally attached to Europe or North America than to

Argentina. Contrasting his own campesino background with that of the agricultural bourgeoisie, Osvaldo, an MCC agronomist, bemoaned the lack of civic commitment among the latter. Of wealthy Argentines, Osvaldo stated: “In Belgium, they [the bourgeoisie] speak Belgian, in England they speak English, here [in Argentina] they speak in English.” That foods produced in Argentina were destined for export was understood by my interlocutors as part of a persistent tradition of extractivism; Cordobés agroecologists pointed to export agriculture as the cause of the seeming disconnect between Argentina’s famous agricultural wealth and the prevalence of poverty among its people. By contrast, agroecologists positioned themselves as feeding the nation. Agroecologists often told me that despite the comparatively small parcels of land available to family agriculture in Córdoba, the vast majority of the food available in the city was produced by this sector. As a slogan, the MCC adopted “*Somos tierra para alimentar el pueblo*” (We are the land to feed the people). By highlighting the role which small-scale farmers played in food production, and casting it explicitly within the language of sovereignty, the MCC and other agroecologists reframed disputes over land-use. Mirroring the situation Meek (2014) explores among the agroecologists of the MST in Brazil, agroecology functioned as part of a moral economy, in which a set of ideological claims about the concentration of land and wealth could be reframed as being about environmental management (and here, national sovereignty) without altering the organisation’s desired political outcome. Whereas previously the disputes were questions of development and land-tenure, the MCC used food sovereignty discourse to make them about national loyalty and a secure supply of food at Cordobés markets.

Telling of the way in which agroecological ideas were put to service in localised political disputes are the surprisingly similar critiques aimed by agroecologists at both industrial-agriculture and organic farming. In studies conducted in England (Smaje 2013), Bolivia (Cockburn 2015), and France (Norder et. al. 2016), authors and/or practitioners do not draw meaningful distinctions between organic and agroecological production. By contrast, in Córdoba, agroecological farmers incessantly distinguished their produce from organics. Organic produce, they would explain, was little more than a brand, a certification that could be bought by any producer with money. They suggested that organics could be produced using slave labour, or that a producer could deforest native growth and still call their produce organic. They viewed organics as a cynical “niche in the market,” as one agroecologist I talked to explained, “You go to the supermarket and there’s an aisle for organics. And they cost fourteen or eighteen times as much as the poisoned stuff! Why, mother fucker? When organics cost the same, or less even, to produce.”

Organic farming was further critiqued over questions of locality. Unlike agroecology, an informant explained, there is no guarantee that an organic farmer would live in the locality of their farm: “There are organic farms where the owners live in Palermo, in Buenos Aires. It’s a wealthy neighbourhood in Buenos Aires, and they have farms a thousand kilometres away and they never see them. It’s an industrial system.” Above all, organics were criticised as a part of the same export agricultural system as conventional agriculture; they did not feed the communities that produced them, but rather were sent overseas to be consumed by wealthy foreigners.

Despite shared environmentalist concerns, and the rejection of chemical inputs as being definitional to both agroecology and organic farming, agroecologists in Córdoba felt little affinity with organic farming. Crucially, organic farming – which was not understood to be promoting food sovereignty as agroecology was – did not offer a political cosmovision that supported marginal Cordobés in either land-disputes or in combatting their economic exclusion more broadly. Indeed, the perceived inaccessibility of organic produce, the labour practices, and the ownership structure shared more in common with industrial agriculture than they did with an Argentine vision of agroecology.

Conspiracy theorising is the narrative form through which Cordobés agroecologists engage in much of their political contestation. It is convincing due to the subjectively located experience of Cordobés agroecologists. It is compelling because it enables conspiracists to directly attribute blame for the suffering they experience. Beyond its conspiracist elements, agroecology more broadly enables Cordobés adherents to discursively position themselves as a moral alternative to industrial agriculture. The political struggles to which this moral claim is being added, however, pre-date the adoption of agroecology by communities. They relate to land-use: the encroaching industrial-agricultural frontier as discussed by the MCC, the use of agro-chemicals as highlighted by the movements at Ituzaingó and Malvinas Argentinas, or the more general trend exacerbated by the soy boom of increasing land concentration and decreasing opportunities for rural employment. This context is central to the adoption of agroecology in Córdoba. The importance of these local, pre-existing environmental politics, and the creative ways in which agroecology is put to use in serving such pre-existing commitments, pushes back against environmentality scholars’ models of top-down, north-south subjectivation of environmental dispositions.

Conclusion

The soy boom that served as a background for the development of agroecology in Córdoba occurred not only in Argentina, but throughout the Southern Cone region, reshaping ecologies and communities in southern Brazil, Paraguay, and Bolivia. In Paraguay Gregg Hetherington (2013) discusses the effects of the soy boom in Campesino communities. There, anti-soy activists make the claim that soy itself kills, a claim which challenges ontological assumptions of human agency to which Paraguayan activists were otherwise committed. Hetherington explores the construction of this attribution of blame to the beans themselves. On this blame, he writes “responsibility is less a characteristic of people than a form of description that one offers of the relationships between different actors in an event whose causal sequences are not merely mechanical” (2013, 71). To distil responsibility down from an assemblage coalescing around soy beans, to lie with the soy beans themselves required discursive work on the part of campesinos and a campaign to validate their apportionment of blame undertaken through the legal system. Ultimately, however, the narrowing of blame helped make a political case against soy that brought the harms associated with industrial agricultural development into far starker relief than otherwise achievable. In Córdoba, while critiques of soy were ubiquitous among my informants, I never heard the bean referred to as itself murderous. Instead Cordobés agroecologists engaged in a process of personalisation of harm, laying the blame on producers as individuals. Producers were, for my interlocutors, profoundly anti-social. At the most extreme producers and their political allies were named *genocidios*, equating them to the military junta that terrorised Argentina in the late 1970s and early 1980s.

This term, “*genocidios*”, was employed by environmental activists at both Ituzaingó and Malvinas Argentinas. It is noteworthy too, that in both cases these same activists engaged in processes of simplifying responsibility, theorising direct causal relations. In Ituzaingó, the Madres narrowed the scope of their complaints from an initially broad set of concerns about general health in Ituzaingó to a more focused campaign against the chemical fumigation of soy fields. In Malvinas Argentinas, on the other hand, the proposed Monsanto plant became contentious not through applying a narrow focus, but by widening the focus of the environmental activists. The specifics of the plant faded into the background as the debate became more about Monsanto itself. Indeed, where critiques did focus on the plant, the concerns voiced were strikingly similar to concerns regarding pesticide use – namely, a fear of water supplies being poisoned, or toxic particles being dispersed over an unintended area. Despite this, the campaign against the Monsanto plant, too, should be read as a process of simplification of responsibility. The plant became a nodal point around which concerns

regarding the community's chemical exposure could be articulated. Similarly, when the activists made charges of political corruption against the government officials who approved the plant's construction, the officials were standing in for a political system that was unconcerned with the incidental causalities of agro-industrial development.

Throughout this chapter I have engaged with the literature on conspiracy theories as a means to understand how agroecology fits into the terrain of Argentine politics regarding land and environments. As well as helpfully describing the suspicion and antagonism present in Argentine political life, conspiracy also aids in thinking through the processes of attributing blame, as discussed above. Conspiracist thought is an exercise in attributing blame, in narrowing the scope of responsibility for the variegated harms associated with peri-urban and rural life in an agricultural export economy dominated by soy.

An inversion of perspective in thinking through conspiracy allows us to reflect on the adaptation of agroecology to local conditions. We can see conspiracy as both 1) a descriptor of Argentine political culture and 2) an analytic for understanding my interlocutors' political claims. Approaching the prevalence of conspiracist thought in agroecology from a different angle is likewise 1) proof of the fact that agroecology is made to fit local conditions and 2) throws into relief just how important land-use disputes are in Córdoba.

The way in which environmentalist thought adapts to local political conditions, and the creative ways environmental theorising is engaged with, problematise the understanding of globally circulating environmental politics as propounded by environmentality authors. There is no direct adoption of agroecology from its Global Northern provenance, but rather a distinct process of adaptation, of crafting agroecological practices and narratives which fit to the Cordobés context. Likewise, Cordobés agroecologists are far from pawns in the establishment of an environmental political regime which extends far beyond them. Rather, they actively engage with agroecology as a means to promote political projects in which they were already involved.

Throughout this chapter I have argued against an understanding of environmentalism as foreign, or as the result of an external imposition from more powerful actors. I have foregrounded community led environmentalist movements, and shown how agroecology is adapted to local conceptualisations of the body and its relationship to environments, while also both reflecting and being iterated through Argentine conspiracist thought. Despite this chapter's emphasis on agroecology's adaptation to pre-existing political contestations, in the next two chapters I will show the inverse: the way in which agroecology foments certain political

commitments among its practitioners and in turn supports federal-level electoral political movements.

That agroecology can be both adapted to local politics, and at the same time be a powerful force in shaping local political commitments may present as a source of tension in understanding the movement, but it is by no means an irreconcilable one. Agroecology is not simply a new language through which to interpret the commitments that preceded it. While it may be put to service in old contestations, it also works to reframe them: to attune practitioners to different forms of relationality, to promote a conceptualisation of bio-intimacy with ecologies, and to make apparent semiotic connections that may not have previously existed. Prior to agroecology marginal Cordobés already engaged in political contestation about the material things present in the ecologies in which they lived, but with agroecology the qualitative significance of these materials and these struggles changed.

Chapter Three

The Things of Populism

Introduction

Throughout my time working on the farm at Maipú I became close with Luis. At thirty-nine Luis was a father of seven. He had come to Evangelical Christianity late in life, and the scarification on his arms, which also bore an incomplete tattoo of a crane, was a testament to a harsh life lived before involving himself with the church and with agroecology. Luis would tell me that the aspect of his work he liked most was being “in contact with the earth, with nature... seeing that work and that effort, three or four months later seeing it reflected there (*plasmado ahí*) in vegetables and fruit.” And that after the difficulty of learning the skills needed to work on the farm, the *ambiente* (atmosphere/environment) of the farm produced in him a sense of peace.

It is a job which, working with the soil, with plants, with foods, it's really beautiful. *Es otra cosa* (it is a whole other thing). It's difficult for me to explain it, but it's like. Even for me when I started here, well, it even gives me peace to come here. Tranquillity, peace because of the environment that they generate here on the farm. A person can find peace here. Spiritual peace, peace and tranquillity. (*hasta me produce paz a mi venir acá. Tranquilidad, paz por el ambiente que se generan en la quinta. Una persona puede encontrar hasta paz. Paz espiritual, paz y tranquilidad.*)

Luis suggestion that he found peace through agroecology resonated with me. Many times over the course of my fieldwork I too experienced the sense of quiet serenity that working with one's hands in cool, damp soil, or intently tending to the fibrous roots of a plant can produce.

Less immediately intelligible, as an ethnographic outsider, was the sense of righteous indignation that Luis' embodied engagement with agroecological materials seemed to provoke within him. He saw agroecology as engaged in a “constant struggle” against conventional production, which he called “agricultura con veneno”. He characterised his antagonists in this struggle, conventional producers, as “people who produce vegetables, and have huge hectares and apply agrochemicals, poisons and the rest, so that they can produce and sell. They are selling at the market to the people, to the neighbours, so then, the only thing that matters to them really is money.”

By contrast, agroecologists attempted to use markets, and the produce they brought to markets, as a means to affect political sympathies in consumers. For instance, various agroecological collectives I was involved with decided to hold a *feriado* in Plazoleta Agustín

Tosca to protest against increasing cuts to state resources and benefits claimable by small producers. This involved an impromptu fresh food market being set up in a public square, an attempt, it was explained to me to increase the visibility of the small-producer and campesino sector. The central city location was chosen in order to bring the issues faced by these groups to light for an urban population that usually did not think about the struggles of producers. “Bringing the vegetables directly from the producer, and seeing the producer too,” as an interlocutor put it, would counteract that blindness.

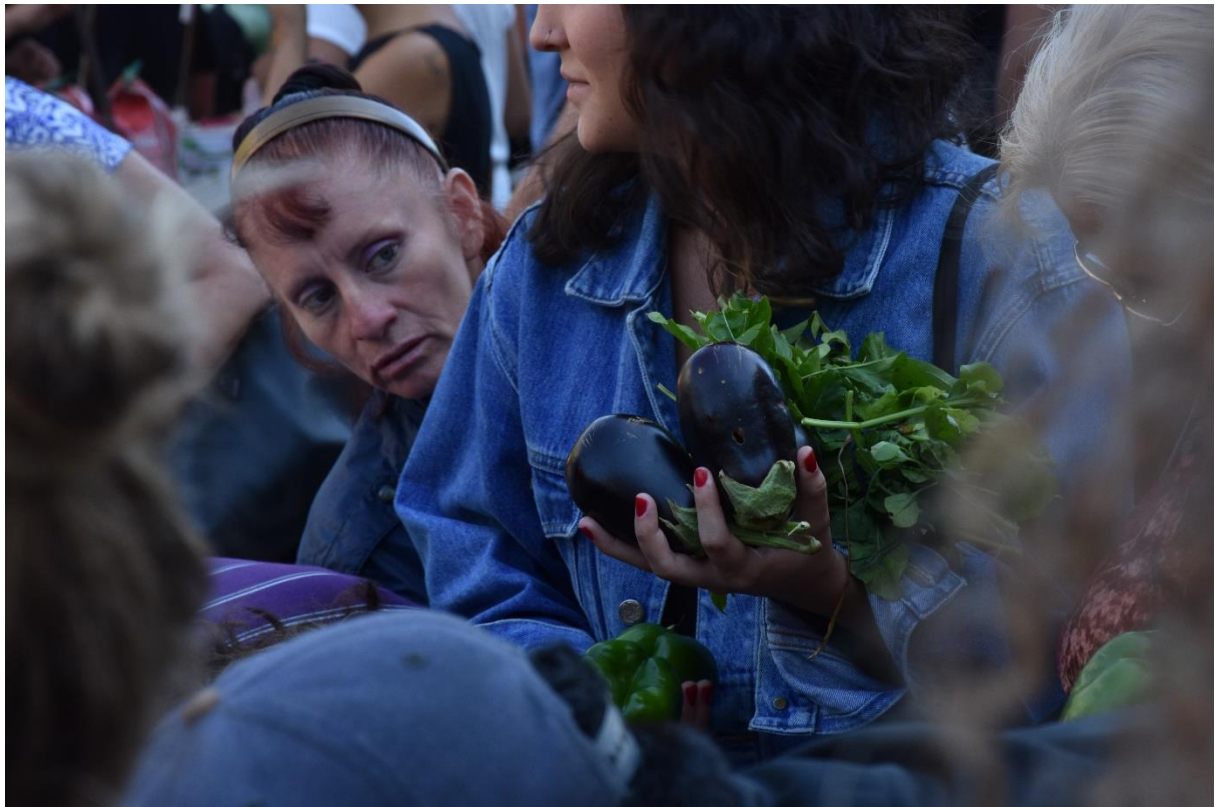


Figure 3: A woman appreciates produce at the Feriazo

While the sale of agroecological foods through the feriazo may or may not have affected the political subjectivities of consumers, they certainly did affect producers. During the feriazo, I spoke with Leanora, an organiser with a leftist social movement and herself an agroecological producer. While describing the quality of life of small, peri-urban producers who she worked to organise – a sector she described as “*muy olvidado*” (very forgotten) – she broke down in tears. “They live like this. They live [in poverty], and they produce our food. It’s really hard. It hurts me so much” she stated. Leanora was upset, she explained, that for most consumers the food they ate did not provoke personal reflection or a sense of solidarity with the producers of that food. Instead the sector was forgotten, and that the Macri government’s cuts to agricultural extension funding – enabled by such forgetting – would limit agroecological

transition pathways and consign producers to a life of chemical production and resultant health issues.

In this chapter I discuss the affective responses agroecologists such as Luis and Leanora had to agroecology and to conventional agriculture as a way of understanding populism. I think through the sentiments provoked by agroecological engagements with matter. As with Luis and Leanora, strong feelings were prompted in agroecologists as they went about their work, and – again mirroring the experiences of both – such feelings were not limited to the farm, but spilled out into assessments of a wider political reality, often targeted at groups believed to be responsible for ecological and economic injustice. Throughout this chapter I argue that agroecological practice – embodied engagement with the plants, soils, and bio-organic technologies used in agroecology – fomented an ideological commitment to populism. In making this argument I break with common understandings of populism as solely discursive, and often depicted as the rhetoric of a charismatic autocrat. This discursive reduction is a common thread of western political philosophy more broadly. In the first two sections of this chapter, I outline common approaches to populism and show their indebtedness to this idealist understanding of politics. In the second half of the chapter, I embark upon a course correction for anthropological studies of populism. By foregrounding agroecological materials I show the processes through which practitioners come to be affected by the things with which they engage, and how such engagements enable populist commitments.

Idealist populism

The western political tradition has been dominated by an immaterialist liberalism. This conception of politics has left little space for understanding the role of material things in political subjectivation, and in this section of the chapter I will discuss this tradition and show how it has been particularly influential in understanding populism.

A long and influential liberal tradition promotes an understanding of politics as solely made up of ideas. Thinking in the Lockean tradition, liberals posit individuals as adherents of an already formed self-interest, leaving little room for the influence of “the material” on these desires. More republican inspired theorists do adopt a less bounded understanding of individuals, but in turning to theories of “social contract” as a basis for a population’s living together, still uphold a notion of politics as reducible to debate (Young 1996). Gregg Hetherington (2020a) notes that the idealism of western political theory has been amplified in the wake of World War II, as political philosophers distancing themselves from the eugenics of fascism have been keen to singularise human life. And indeed, leading political theorists such as Jürgen Habermas

(1989), Jacques Rancière (1999), and Iris Marion Young (2000) continue to depict politics as a matter of ideas or discourse.

An idealist conception of politics has been strongly criticised by materialist thinkers. Cultural geographers Bruce Braun and Sarah Whatmore (2010) suggest that the western tradition is based upon an understanding of society as human transcendence of the physical. “In its own accounts,” they write, “political theory is often said to begin with (and as) an active purification of human society from the material world, in which the idea of humankind’s removal from a state of nature marks the threshold of civilization and the possibility of political order – an idea prosecuted with vigour through projects of empire” (2010, xiv). Bruno Latour similarly lampoons the artificial asceticism of idealist conceptions of the political, which he characterises as “empty arenas where naked people were supposed to assemble to talk” (2005a, 17).

Environmental anthropology has long concerned itself with demonstrating the co-constructive relationship between ecologies and human political systems. That politics is not siloed off from the material world is the foundational premise of political ecology, a field of study that has compellingly argued that political systems are shaped by the environments in which they are situated and with which they engage (Wolf 1972; Mintz 1985; Friedmann and McMichael 1989). More recent political ecology has maintained an interest in the role of environments in politics but has come to focused on political identities (Connell 2020; Besky 2019; Blanchette 2019). Jake Kosek cogently explores this dynamic through forests in northern New Mexico:

The discovery of the self in the supposedly timeless material of nature has served as one of the most dominant themes in western environmentalism. People go to nature to find their “true selves,” to “remember” the basis of life. The “call of the wild” is, in truth, nature’s hailing. It is a green version of Louis Althusser’s famous “hey, you there,” but in this case the interpellating agent is not a state official but a social and political history that is vested in and bound up in the material of mountains, rivers, and forests. Because the hailing is outside humanity, because it is from a “pure” source, the calling goes unexamined and its political histories remain obscured. (2006, 158)

Despite the strong challenges that both materialist and environmentalist anthropology have presented to idealist conceptions of politics, these insights have rarely been applied to studies of populism. Dahlgren (2019) and Balthazar (2017) present exceptions, and a number of authors have noted the importance of accounting for the body in populism (Cody 2015; Tambar 2009; Mazzarella 2019) – a topic I turn to in the next chapter.

For the most part, studies of populism have not only ignored the material aspects of populist politics, but have cast it as a particularly ephemeral form of discourse. Within political science, a major approach to populism characterises it as nothing but rhetorical style, cynically deployed to win over the masses, generally by a charismatic strongman (Mammone 2009; Jansen 2011; Weyland 2017). Outside of this school, Pierre Ostiguy's "socio-cultural" approach depicts populism as a "flaunting of the low" (2017, 73), a strategy through which populist leaders connect to their publics in a joint celebration of shared cultural attitudes and behaviours supposedly at odds with those held by "high society".

Within anthropology as well, analysis has primarily been concerned with the supposedly distinctive discourse and rhetorical style of populist leaders (cf. Coronil and Skurski 1991; Comaroff 2011; Sánchez 2016; Giusto 2020). The recent collection of essays *Language in the Trump Era* (2020) makes clear that certain discursive dynamics are considered definitional to anthropology's approach to populism.³⁰ Granted, it would be hard to find a politician more in line with the image of the demagogic leader which scholars of populism focused on discourse have theorized than Donald Trump. At the same time, however, I argue that a discursive approach to populism as obscuring the way commitments to populist ideology are made and lived with in a quotidian sense. As I argue at length in the next chapter, an approach to populism that is blind to the material almost inevitably overlooks the ways in which populist commitments are made through quotidian engagements with the world, and in so doing prioritises elite level discourse with the effect of erasing the political agency of populist supporters.

In this chapter I argue that not only is populism an ideology, but that far from being purely discursive, populist ideology is made and fomented with material things. Agroecological plants, soils, fertilisers, and pest-controls functioned as the semiotic-materials through which populist ideological commitments would be made. Agroecology metonymically brings to mind, for my informants, that which it is not: that is, conventional agriculture, which is seen as toxic, environmentally degrading, oriented to foreign markets, and oligarchic. As such I also discuss how interactions with conventionally produced agriculture are involved in generating the sentiments of populism. As studies in environmental humanities have made clear the material things of "nature" have a great propensity for being invested with and generating semiotic meaning (Kosek 2006; Hayden 2003; Cronon 1996). As Matthew Hull underlines, "Anthropologists have long recognized that things are signs, but until recently they have often

³⁰ This is by no means to reject the contributions of McIntosh and Mendoza-Denton's collection. See chapters by Slotta, McIntosh, Sidnell, and Jacquemet for particularly astute readings of Trumpian discourse.

ignored that signs are things” (2012, 13). Drawing upon these insights I will spend the remainder of this chapter discussing the semiotic-material “things of populism”. Before more fully explaining my conceptualisation of populism and the populist semiotics invested in material things I discuss the processes by which agroecologists become attentive to such meanings, and in turn how they are moved by their intimate encounters with plants and soils.

What is populism?

Populism is notoriously difficult to define; it has no canonical manifesto, rarely do political movements explicitly adopt the label, and even early populist movements that bear the title (e.g., the Russian Narodniks and the People’s Party in the United States) are routinely excluded from discussions of populism for not meeting analysts’ criteria (cf. Weyland 2017). In a piece published in the wake of the 2016 United States presidential election and the Brexit referendum in the United Kingdom, Hugh Gusterson stated simply of populism: “One knows it when one sees it” (2017, 209). I do not intend in this chapter to find a definition when so many other scholars of populism have failed to do so. Rather, I make a case for a certain set of characteristics of populism which shows that it should be considered as an ideology, and that this ideology is made through engagement with material things. I show throughout this chapter that it is a deeply held normative belief about how the world should be, a materialist ethics, the principles of which serve an evaluative function for its adherents. Drawing upon the existing literature as well as insights from my own ethnographic research, I return to the description of populism I outlined in this thesis’ introduction. When I use the term “populism”, I am describing an ideological commitment to majoritarianism, which functions upon a dynamic of inclusion and exclusion in which the populists’ supposed exclusion is attributable to a corrupt minority “other”. This exclusion may be from the economic development of the state, from participation in the decision-making processes of the polity, or from the social community of the nation.

Various elements of this populist worldview are detectable in the testimony of Ayelen, a forty-one-year-old activist for the Movimiento Campesino de Córdoba. Ayelen was born and raised in Córdoba capital, but her father, she was quick to note, was from the countryside. She would refer to herself as *una negra*, often contrasting her looks as well as her personality with my own, which she described as *gringo* or even European (despite my repeated objections that I am not a European). She mainly worked as the manager of the urban storefront run by the movement, a job for which she was well suited due to her warm, genuinely caring personality. When the store emptied of customers, she would often take on a much more serious tone as she provided me with an education in Argentine politics. In early 2018, she was lamenting the difficult times that Argentines faced in the third year of President Macri’s mandate.

“We’re in a bad situation now... In Argentina we had the best wages for workers in Latin America. This didn’t fit well with the plans of the Yankee empire. They want cheap labour. They want to turn us into India, into Indonesia, where workers exist like slaves.”

She noted the analogous situations in Brazil and Argentina, which she stressed were the two most powerful players in the Mercosur trade-bloc and in which leaders she saw as defending workers were undergoing legal persecution. “They’ve just locked up [former Brazilian president, and potential 2018 candidate] Lula, and look what’s happening to Argentina [a reference to the ongoing legal-cases against Cristina Fernández de Kirchner].”³¹ Echoing the theorisation of power, culpability, and causality which I discussed in the previous chapter, Ayelen saw the Macri government as engaged in a cronyism in which worker protections were diminished for the economic benefit of national and international political allies. In turn this political cabal received the protection of anti-democratic judges with similar vested interests.

The image of a polity split between a majority under attack and a corrupt and corrupting minority appears frequently throughout the literature on populism. Authors who treat populism as an ideology tend to characterise populism as fundamentally Manichean, splitting the polity into a virtuous majority (identified as “the people”) locked in struggle with a corrupt and corrupting minority (“the elites”) (Mudde and Kaltwasser 2012; Hawkins 2009; Karush 2010; Laclau 2005). Echoing this sense of public polarisation, but focusing more specifically on the idea of attack, Robert Samet (2019) identifies a feeling of shared victimhood, suffered at the hands of a more powerful antagonist, as central to populist mobilisation. Ayelen’s forlorn summary of the situation she perceived to be playing out, “*Nos están pegando de todos lados*” (They’re hitting us from all sides) speaks to this same morally laden, collective identity formed by a “victimized ‘Us’ against a perpetrating ‘Them’” (Samet 2019, 274).

Margaret Canovan’s (1981; 1999) work likewise speaks to populism as entailing a division of society between the “common people” and “the elites,” but also highlights what I consider a central element to populist ideology: a dynamic of inclusion/exclusion. Populists, for Canovan, locate legitimate authority as coming only from the people. Canovan suggests populism arises from a breach emerging between democracy’s dual roles as both pragmatic and redemptive. The pragmatism of democracy, as a system of governance that by necessity involves myriad institutions, comes into tension with democracy’s redemptive promise when those institutions

³¹ The notion of “lawfare” - the use, by conservative governments, of the judiciary to prosecute leftist politicians - became a Peronist talking point throughout 2018, especially following the incarceration of Luis Lula da Silva. This discourse provided a retort to the mounting charges being laid against Cristina Fernández de Kirchner. The extent to which “lawfare” fits with Margaret Canovan’s (1999) discussion of the tensions inherent to democracy being exploited by populism is notable.

hinder the people's will (1999, 10). Similarly, the idealism of democracy, which Canovan attributes to a liberal heritage, committed to Lockean ideas of protecting against the tyranny of the majority limits the democratic say of populists (1999, 7). Populism, for Canovan, is hyper-majoritarian. Its appeal lies in this promise to "the majority" of inclusion within decision-making processes from which they currently perceive themselves to be excluded.

Notions of popular exclusion feature in various other accounts of populism. The historian Michael Kazin (1995) notes that while American populism has existed at various points across a right-left spectrum, it is uniformly a response to groups feeling that their (supposedly mainstream) view, was being neglected by ruling elites. Similarly, the anthropologist Don Kalb, in his study of right-wing populism among post-Soviet Poles points to populism as "moods and sensibilities of the disenfranchised" (2009, 209). More concretely, Kalb describes populism as "the rejection of liberal elites and ideologies that fail to use the resources of the democratic national state to harness global processes to local needs and desires" (2009, 209). Echoing Canovan's suggestion that the European Union would be particularly targeted by populists due to its anti-majoritarian regulations, Kalb's interlocutors specifically identify the E.U.'s control of Polish trade policy as indicative of their exclusion from both decision-making and economic participation (2009, 210).

Despite the wide political divide between Kalb's research participants and my own, there is a commonality in the discourse of exclusion shared between the populists. This experience of exclusion is both a sense of exclusion from the benefits of the economy as well as an exclusion from decision making processes about the economy. In Ayelen's comments we can see the first of these exclusions voiced as she described the deliberate process of worker-impoverishment she believed was occurring. The second exclusion, while less obvious, is also present. The judiciary – the sort of unelected institution of democracy that Canovan warns can hinder the popular will – was depicted as colluding with conservative forces to impede the democratic process which would have brought pro-worker governments to power, namely that of Lula da Silva in Brazil, and Cristina Fernández de Kirchner in Argentina. Throughout my experience with agroecologists a suggestion that democratic processes were being undermined was commonly repeated to me. That political and legal systems were felt to have been captured by wealthy elites reflects a sense of class-based exclusion from decision making processes.

Ayelen's commentary on the decline of worker protections and wages as a result of U.S. machinations also speaks to concerns of sovereignty. Aihwa Ong (2006) develops the concept

of “graduated sovereignties” to name a dynamic in that states which once commanded popular legitimacy through their management of development have deliberately ceded control over aspects of their national economy so as to attract foreign capital. Abandoning a project of workers’ rights so as to accede to the economic interests of “the Yankee empire,” represents, then, a surrender of sovereignty. In keeping with the Manichean dualism of populist logic, this was enacted by one set of citizens – the conservative oligarchy – against another – the workers. As Ong makes clear “graduated sovereignty” is accompanied by “graduated citizenship” in which some segments of the national population are required to cede rights within this internationalised system, while others retain them to become the beneficiaries of globalisation. The “logic of popular sovereignty” (2019, 291) is, according to Samet, definitional of populism. While I do not afford sovereignty such a central place, it is still commonly linked with populist thought writ-large, and Peronism/Kirchnerism more specifically. Ayelen’s comments here only serve to prefigure the relationship between populism and sovereignty, which I discuss in greater detail later in this chapter. Having explained my conceptualisation of the ideological tenets of populism, however, it is important to first discuss what I mean by ideology, and to explore how it can be materially developed.

Governing for the cows, or governing for the people

To claim that populism is an ideological commitment necessitates clarifying what I mean by “ideology” and how my interlocutors engaged with ideological thought. In this section I will discuss how recent trends in anthropological and other social scientific approaches to ideology enable populism to be understood as an ideological project. Following that I will begin to explore how populist ideology is on the one hand pieced together through quotidian engagements with the world and at the same time, functions as a framework for those same engagements.

To theoretically reconcile the way populism manifests as both left- and right-wing within the western political spectrum, Mudde and Kaltwasser deploy the term “thin centred ideology” (2012, 149). This characterisation is meant to indicate that populism only addresses audiences with and through other ideological traditions, and – as with Kalb’s anti-immigrant, right-wing Poles, and my own left-wing interlocutors – these traditions can be extremely varied. As Sune Haugbolle explains, however, while academic studies of ideology prior to the fall of the Berlin Wall conceptualized ideology as rigid and totalising, increasingly theorists are attuned to the plural, hybrid nature of all ideological commitments (2018, 192).³² Over the same period

³² This temporalizing split should not imply that all theorization of ideology prior to the end of the Soviet Union viewed ideology as totalising, a similar point is made by the theorist of populism, Peter Worsley (1969), who –

characterisations of ideology as “false consciousness” and Althusserian understandings of ideology as a component of the state apparatus (Althusser 2008) have lost their appeal for a growing number of social analysts (Haugbolle 2018; Freeden 2013; Gal and Irvine 2019). Equally distant to the conception of ideology I join these authors in putting forth, is ideology as the “sublime object,” the *objet petit a* which Žižek (2008, 140-143) suggests acts as an enjoyable salve that occludes the impossibility of society.

In place of theories that depict ideology as mystifying, social analysts are coming to understand ideology as everywhere, always hybrid, and integral to how people make sense of their worlds. Sune Haugbolle (2018) makes the claim that studies of ideology should be central to political anthropology, and the arguments he makes are helpful in showing the way thinking anthropologically about ideology can be generative. Haugbolle engages with the political theorist Michael Freeden, and with Freeden, makes the case for unpacking ideology not through macro-level canonical literature or elite discourse, but through micro-level, quotidian engagements with ideology (2018, 192). In his own attempt at theorising political thought, Freeden writes, “the ‘macro’ is then loosely fashioned from endlessly fluctuating, interlocking ‘micros’, but never serves as a straitjacket for the latter” (2013, 27). Following this approach, then, ideology is not a totalising system of thought that obscures reality, but is flexible and pieced together ad hoc.

Although ideological commitments may be made through micro-level engagements with the world, they simultaneously serve as an evaluative framework for assessing that same world. Clifford Geertz (1973) recognised the ubiquity and unavoidability of engaging in ideological thought, as well as ideology’s fundamentally evaluative function. He argued that the role of ideology was in “providing the authoritative concepts that render [politics] meaningful” (1973, 218). This understanding of ideology represents not so much a tenet of Geertz’ project of symbolic anthropology, but instead a more modern discomfort with models that seek to explain away sincerely held ideological commitments. In defending the study of ideology on these terms, Haugbolle claims that “ideology is an integral part of human sense-making...Ideological constructs are simply the way we categorize and prioritize the social world we would like to bring into place” (2018, 195). Again, an evaluative function of ideology comes through as Haugbolle adopts Bo Strath’s characterisation of ideologies as “cognitive structures with legitimizing functions” (Strath 2006, 23). Ideology, for these theorists, is an inevitable element in how humans make assessments. On the one hand, ideological schemas are pieced together

while ultimately arguing populism does not constitute an ideology – rejected the reasoning that it was too hybrid to be ideological. All ideologies, for Worsley, were recombined in various ways with other commitments.

through quotidian “micros”, on the other they serve as evaluative frameworks for how we understand the world. While these two descriptions of ideology may appear to be in tension regarding the flow of causality, read together, they invite theorists to understand ideology as multi-directional. Ideology at once structures evaluations of the world, while itself being put-together through the same moments of normative engagement.

One such moment of ideological evaluation developed through “micros” was the juxtaposition of the status of cattle and campesinos that was laid out for me by Federico. At sixty-eight, Federico had a thick white handlebar moustache, and always wore a gaucho’s beret. He was a senior member of the political board of the MCC, and had also worked as a professor of agronomy for many years. He had trained a number of the agronomists who would be founding members of the various branches of the MCC in the late 1990s and early 2000s. Towards the end of our interview he reflected on the ever-diminishing number of campesino producers in Argentina, placing blame for this situation with the policies of successive governments. Staking the majoritarian claim of campesinos, Federico calculated:

“Perhaps in terms of the numbers of producers, of farmers, they [campesinos] would still be the most numerous. If we were to count how many big producers, how many medium, how many small, how many campesinos there are, perhaps, even today, the biggest section would be campesinos.”

Applying this to cattle production, Federico claimed that 70 to 75 percent of the owners of cattle in Argentina are campesinos, but due to the concentration of wealth in mega-farms campesinos only own “5 percent, 4 percent, 3 percent [of cattle]. They [campesinos] are the most in numbers, but the least in [cattle]”. He continued:

“So, when you want to make livestock or farming policy, you want to make a choice: to work for the cows or to work for the people. Here they always make policy for the cows, so they are working for one, two percent of producers. A government should work for the people. I always say to my students, if you are president what will you do: work for the cows or for the people?”

Federico’s analysis of Argentine agricultural policy was undeniably populist. It was based in the primacy of campesinos numerical superiority over any other interest group, a primacy that was reinforced with the simple principle: “A government should work for the people.” In Federico’s classically Manichean vision, campesinos’ own exclusion from the benefits that a sympathetic state agricultural policy could provide was caused by the capture of those benefits

by an elite minority. Telling of the place of the non-human in populist politics, Federico at once dehumanised the large-scale producers he viewed campesino as being in conflict with – describing them as cattle – while also elevating the status of cows, casting them as political subjects who currently attract even greater rights than people.

Populist ideology came into being and was reinscribed by evaluative moments such as these. It was through witnessing injustices such as the gearing of the economy towards already wealthy cattle owners and to agro-export, and the ensuing diminishment of campesino families – many of whom Federico claimed would end up in urban slums – that an ideological commitment to populism was formed. But at the same time, populism as an ideology also served as an evaluative framework to judge the justice or injustice of these same government policies and their outcomes; policies with which Federico was intimately familiar after a long career in agronomy and community organising. In turn this experiential evaluation became a maxim of political principle that Federico would try to instil in his students, future agronomists who he hoped would be committed to working “for the people.”

Populism is an ideological project: it is a deeply felt, normative and evaluative set of principles based upon understandings of how a polity should be organised. The fact that populism manifests in movements on both the left and the right of the traditional western political spectrum should not be read as disqualifying populism from the status of ideology, but rather is attributable to the hybridity inherent in all ideological thought.

The learned sensitivity and embodied encounters of agroecology

Rather than the ascetic political landscape imagined by much of traditional western philosophy, in the rest of this chapter I argue that ideological commitments to populism come into being through roughly textured encounters with material things. I have thus far explained what I see as characterising populism, and argued for an understanding of ideology which does not denigrate ideological commitments, but treats them as inevitable projects of normative evaluation. In the rest of this chapter, I ethnographically explore the “micros” Freedden theorises as establishing ideological frameworks. It is through an intense tactile engagement with agroecological materials, combined with their specific understanding of the particular natures of those materials, that agroecologists become open to, and moved by, the meanings invested in this matter. In this second half of the chapter, I detail the process through which materials acted upon agroecologists and explain how such embodied relations with matter came to promote their populist ideological commitments.

Agroecological thought entails a heightened sensitivity towards the effects that vegetable matter, both agroecological and conventionally produced, could provoke in people. Consuming agroecological foods was seen to have positive effects on the body. Such foods were held to be reliable vehicles for important life-giving elements, discussions of which ranged from the vague “forces” to more concrete explanations of the higher nutritional content of agroecological fruits and vegetables attributable to techniques for improving soils. For similar reasons agroecologists promoted the use of natural remedies instead of pharmaceutical medication (although most people I knew still did use conventional medication). Many stalls at Córdoba’s agroecological market were dedicated to such treatments, on farms there would frequently be discussions about the potentials of various plants in medicine, and I was once chided for using painkillers to treat my headaches. The perceived effects of what was eaten were not limited to somatic health, agroecologists also pointed to mental and social problems as similarly attributable to the food populations consumed, albeit less often than bodily concerns were discussed.

As discussed in Chapter Two, agroecology is an example of what Kath Weston (2017) calls bio-intimacy: a commitment to the indivisibility of bodies and ecologies. For agroecologists, the relationship between themselves and the ecologies they inhabit is a co-constitutive one, a case of intra- rather than inter-relatedness. Weston is keen, however, to emphasise that what she is discussing is a question of perception. She is specifically not interested in promoting (or disproving) post-humanist or new animist debates about the agency of matter and our collective human relationship to it, but rather in taking movements – such as agroecology – which are “[fascinated] with ecologically infused animacies and intimacies” (2017, 4) as her subject of investigation.

Adoption of a worldview in which plants are animate and co-agentive with people was fostered by the primary methodology of agroecology: an intense, embodied intimacy between practitioners and agroecological matter that served as a means of assessment of plants and soils. Recent ethnographies of alternative food practices have highlighted the importance of human acts of care and attention to plants in multi-species encounters. Chudakova (2017) demonstrates that for Siberian Buddhists medicinal plants are not potent in their own right, but only become so through human “intense and all-absorbing work of attending to fickle entanglements” (2017, 352). Likewise, in her study of Colombian agroecologists, Kristina Lyons names the process of becoming attuned to the vitality of agroecological matter as “*ojos para ella*” (eyes for her [the Amazon rainforest]) (Lyons 2020, 20). This analytic speaks to the way farmers’ bodies, labour, and worksites inform one another. As Lyons puts it, “cultivating

entails processes of cultivating and being cultivated by” (2020, 20). Importantly, a relationship in which people and ecologies exist in a co-constitutive “bio-intimacy” is not a pre-given, but is an outlook enabled by intense, embodied labour which prioritise a caring attentiveness.

One such moment of intimate attention occurred at an agroecological workshop held outside Colonia Caroya, a satellite town some forty kilometres from Córdoba capital. Pushing through thickets of small evergreens we – a group of two-dozen, mostly middle-aged workshop participants – found the location in which a rice trap had been left. Mateo – a state agronomist in his early fifties – dug up the jar, minding to bring up dirt as he did. A rice trap is a glass jar, filled with semi-boiled rice, the mouth of the jar covered with a thin cloth and secured with rubber bands or twine. The trap is buried, left for a week (longer if the weather is cold or excessively dry), and then dug up to be examined. In its time underground, the moist rice attracts fungus, spores being fine enough to pass through the cloth barrier and colonise. When the rice trap is dug up, a white gossamer envelops the grains, with red, green, yellow and black nodules indicating the presence of different fungi.

In this jar, which Mateo held up to show the group, there were yellow and green spores, both signs of beneficial fungi, as well as worrying specks of red. While he assessed that the land was healthy based on this fungal sample, he was disappointed that here in this patch of *monte nativo* (native scrub) he could not see a greater density of the green and yellow globes – barely more than in the jar left at the soy farm which we had observed moments earlier. The soil was dark, however, which he explained is a good sign indicating an abundance of microbial life. Mateo invited the group to smell the soil. An elderly man, part of the agroecological group, squatted on his haunches over a green plastic tray filled with the dirt. “*Qué rico!*” (Delicious!) he exclaimed, inhaling the scent of the earth. “Eat it!” shouted one of the women gathered around him. “*Quiero comerlo*” (I want to eat it) he said, before picking up a clump of the dirt, lifting it to his tongue, and chewing. The women laughed. Mateo was pleased, explaining that the soil is filled with nutrients. The man agreed and repeated his action.

The elderly man’s consumption of the soil was at once an assessment of agroecological goods, and a commitment to agroecology as a political project. Throughout the scene the body is repeatedly used to assess the health of soils, which we had previously been told produced a one-to-one result in terms of promoting of human health benefits. First the group visually inspected the rice trap to deduce the presence of helpful and harmful fungi, Mateo had similarly pointed to the colour of the soil as indicating microbial richness. The elderly man then smelt the dirt, apparently ascertaining some quality of richness from the scent. Finally, he tasted it,

and, finding it to his liking and full of nutrients, tasted it again. These assessments affirmed the bio-intimacy of humans as intra-related with their ecological surrounds, a world-view agroecology promotes. Ecological health, which would ultimately benefit human health, was ascertained by moments of embodied intimacy.

Beyond reaffirming a sense of bio-intimacy, these embodied assessments of soils also helped promote the more obviously political values of agroecology. That embodied phenomenological experience of farmlands was the most privileged form of agricultural knowledge has normative implications for how workshop participants should think about the rural political economy. Embodied agroecological knowledge was frequently contrasted with the supposedly remote, disengaged knowledge of conventional producers, often depicted to me as investors living in Buenos Aires. When we consider that the aim of this exercise was to demonstrate the (hypothetically) degraded soil quality of a soy farm as against the pristine *monte nativo*, the remoteness of the investors shifts from being merely neglectful to represent much more suspicious extractivism.

The commitment to a bio-intimate relationship with the soil, as well as the hostility the gathered agroecologists had for property investors, involved processes of learning to be attentive. Agroecological practice does reshape the material world in which practitioners find themselves, but it also entails reshaping the environmental dispositions of those same practitioners. Upon learning to be attentive to ecologies through a multi-sensorial intimacy, practitioners become primed not only to diagnose threats facing ecologies, but also, to place those threats within a broader political context. It is this second-order attentiveness to which I now turn.

Agroecological assessments of the political

Where in the last section I discussed agroecological methods as promoting a particular form of relating to the non-human world, in this section I broaden the implications of agroecological practice, arguing that agroecology primes practitioners to interpret and consume both conventional and agroecological foods within in particular political framework. Returning to the vignettes with which I opened this chapter, of the anger and sorrow Luis and Leanora experienced as they engaged with and discussed agroecological and conventional farming, I suggest such sentiments should be understood as expressions of the populist commitments agroecology prompts from its Cordobés practitioners. I am not suggesting that agroecology is inherently populist. Rather I argue that the relations between ideas of conventional agriculture, toxicity, and foreign capital on the one hand, and agroecological farming, small scale producers

and ideas of health on the other, are interpreted within a socio-political context marked by hermeneutics of suspicion and polarisation. It is these interpretations which prompt populist commitments. It is worthwhile for readers to think back to breached “cognitive consensus” and civic antagonism, which in Chapter Two I suggested characterised Argentine political culture in order to understand this polarisation. I use Peircean semiotics to demonstrate how ideology’s “micros” are materially experienced and scaled up to serve as the basis for political evaluations.

As I have been arguing throughout this chapter, a reified “political”, which exists as a sphere of human transcendence of nature and matter obscures the way political commitments are made through quotidian engagements with the world; inter-species relations play an important role in shaping humans’ political commitments. I have already started to suggest that agroecology could act to promote particular ideological commitments: participants’ commitment to bio-intimate relationships saw them make political strawmen of landowners based in Buenos Aires as a means to critique the concentration of land ownership and extractivism, and likewise Federico blurred human non-human distinctions when suggesting the state governed for cattle.

The emotional responses of Luis and Leanora should similarly be understood as expressions of their political commitments, which have been developed through an attentive engagement with plant matter. Affect theorists have convincingly argued for the importance of considering emotions or affects in studies of politics (Ahmed 2014; Navarro-Yashin 2012; Stoler 2007; Shoshan 2014). In a study of Mozambican gardeners, Julie Soleil Archambault (2016) applies affect theory to the plant-human relations she witnessed. Archambault argues that we should take seriously gardeners claims that the inter-species relation between themselves and their plants is one of love. She suggests that the selfless love involved in caring for plants offers gardeners a template for alternative, less commodified sociality than those to which they are accustomed. For Archambault, such engagements represent the “transformative potential of everyday engagement with the material world” (2016, 246). Likewise, Guntra Aistara (2018), working with organic farmers in Latvia and agroecologists in Costa Rica, suggests that the physical markers of landscapes – sediments of a long historical engagement of the human with the non-human – prompt behaviours that can either trouble or facilitate political projects.³³ Through an embodied labour that involves learning to see ecologies in a particular way, both Luis and Leanora opened themselves to being affected by “plant matter.” Their emotional

³³ See in particular Chapter Three of her monograph, *Organic Sovereignties* (2018).

responses are testament to being affected by plants and express the political commitments that such inter-species engagements enabled.

Beyond Luis and Leanora's responses, I was struck throughout my fieldwork by the way in which my interlocutors' moods would alter as they interacted with the things which populated agroecological farms, particularly in engagements where they sensed the presence of life. While showing me the "bio-factory" where Huerta Maipú produced agroecological fertilisers and pesticides, one farmer dug his hand in a mound of fertiliser, turning it over to show me the dark soil being generated. "Here there is [microbial-bacterial] life. A lot of life, that's why it's better" he said happily, and for no reason in particular continued to move his fingers through the dark surface soil at the top of the bag. Similarly, at another peri-urban farm on which I regularly worked, an agroecologist excitedly pointed out a patch of parsley that had self-seeded from stalks left as ground-cover after the last harvest. He marvelled at the ability of the eco-system to produce like this, and noted that such self-seeding increased diversity; upon returning to the farmhouse, he repeated his excitement to the other workers. A few days later, when the same farmer noticed a whole row of chicory had also self-seeded he became visually over-joyed and called over his co-workers to take note. As with the workshop participants assessments of soils it was both the depth of multi-sensorial embodied engagements with the qualities of agroecological matter, and the presence of life that such encounters revealed that left my interlocutors affected.

Affect theory provides a framework for thinking through the emotional responses of my interlocutors as they sensed agroecological life (or as with Luis and Leanora, suffering); to think through the political implications of such responses, I bring this framework into conversation with Peircean semiotics. Semiotic analysis based on the work of Charles S. Pierce has been increasingly adopted within anthropology, particularly as a means to think through the material qualities of signs (Munn 1992; Keane 2003; Weiss 2016; Chumley and Harkness 2013). Unlike Saussurean semiology – upon which much symbolic anthropology is based – Peirce's work rejects the fundamental arbitrariness of the sign. In his tripartite theorisation signs are categorised as icons, indexes, and symbols, with only symbols retaining de Saussure's arbitrariness, reflecting the signified (or in Peirce's terms, object) through convention alone. Icons point to their object through physical resemblance, and indexes are established through an assumed causal connection with what they signify (smoke being indexical of fire etc.).

The non-arbitrary nature of icons and indexes has made Peircean semiotics attractive to anthropologists thinking about the relationship between matter and meaning. A second Peircean triptych – of qualities, qualia, and qualisigns – has been fruitful here. “Qualities” refer to the properties of materials, whereas “qualia” refers to the subject’s embodied experience of both these qualities and the feelings which they might provoke (Chumley and Harkness 2013; Munn 1992). This latter point is important: while quality might be individually experienced, the way it is experienced is shaped by its cultural meanings. As such the sensuous, tactile experience of quality is not separated from its semiotics, the two-sides are experienced as a whole. “Qualisigns”, finally, relate to qualia drawn out to semiotically stand for something. In Nancy Munn’s (1992) now genre-defining study of value *The Fame of Gawa*, qualities existing in Gawan bodies (lightness, vibrancy, movement) were first experienced as embodied qualia before being extrapolated out to signify positive or negative qualisigns of value within a broader societal framework.

In coming into contact with the material qualities of agroecology – the darkness of the soil, its smell and taste, or even the chicory’s wild excess – agroecologists engaged in an embodied semiotic process with deeply political implications. These experiences of material quality were all encounters with the vitality of the agroecological world; in each case the farmers were celebrating markers of life. These moments of embodied engagement were qualia, as farmers experienced both the tactile materiality of agroecological things and the significance which they drew from it. The (microbial) life which agroecological materials evidenced as an abstract quality was meaningful for how such materials were assessed in a way which outstripped the benefits such life afforded crop production. For agroecologists this “life” was explicitly contrasted with conventional agriculture, referred to by agroecologists as “agriculture with chemicals” or “agriculture with poison,” (*veneno*) fatal to both plant and human communities.



Figure 4: A worker appreciates the size of the corn grown at Huerta Maipú. Note that the corn is interspersed with pumpkin. Agroecologists take inspiration here from the central American "milpa"

The qualic experience of "life" pointed towards agroecology as life-giving. Due to the dichotomous relationship in which agroecology and conventional agriculture were symbolically constructed as existing, this in turn re-emphasised conventional agriculture as causing suffering. In signifying beyond its own bounded experience the qualia became a qualisign. In Nancy Munn's work it is through qualisigns – embodied signifiers of positive or negative value transformations, materialised in bodies, canoes, and gardens – that Gawan society assessed its own communal viability (1992). Nicholas Harkness shows the "softness" of soju in South Korea to be a qualic experience extrapolated to constitute norms of gendered behaviour. He writes: "Qualisigns emerge as points of orientation in social action" (2003, 15). Similarly, Webb Keane writes that "Abstracting 'qualisigns' from objects offers a way of bringing discrete moments of experience into an overarching value system on the basis of habits and intuitions rather than rules and cognitions" (2003, 415). Agroecologists' individually experienced moments of qualia, then, were extrapolated outwards, put in conversation with one another to serve as the basis for evaluations that extended far beyond the farms on which they occurred.

The evaluative and norm creating capacity of qualisigns that Munn, Harkness, and Webb describe has resonances with my earlier characterisation of ideology as normative

assessments made through quotidian “micros”. In this sense, “life” served as a qualisign to structure not only assessments of individual qualic experiences, but assessments of the justice or injustice of Argentina’s political-economy. Life as a qualisign reinforced the anti-social nature of conventional export agriculture which I discussed in Chapter Two. Conventional agriculture is anti-social in that it delimited relationships to solely human ones and cut off the life-giving possibilities of the ecological world, which could be sensed through the surfeit of agroecological life contrasted with conventional agriculture’s sterility. At the same time, agroecologists could (and did, see Raul’s comments in Chapter Two) place conventional agriculture in opposition to life due to its reliance on veneno and the rural depopulation agro-industry had caused. Although the relationship is not indelible, once established, the meaning of a qualisign and the qualia to which it is related will continue to be implicated in one another: a qualic experience will be shaped by the culturally recognised qualisign, while the strength/coherence/persuasion of the qualisign will be further conventionalized through repeated qualia. The (micro) qualic experience of sensing life on an agroecological farm entails imagining those farms which are no longer lively and (through qualisign) structures the ideological evaluation of such farmscapes as political developments. Bringing Peircean semiotics into conversation with discussions of ideology offers a means to understand how political subjectivation takes place through engagements with the material world. Politics entered through the body, the seat of qualic experience, as agroecologists ate, smelled, saw, and felt agroecological materials, ultimately motivating populist ideological commitments.

In this next section I continue with this discussion, with an eye to “sovereignty” and “the domestic” as value creating qualisigns. Motifs of the domestic/domestication feature heavily in both agroecology and Peronist populism, and it is through domestic(ation) that the discussed quotidian, micro-level encounters take on their personal and political stakes.

Domestic populism

It is well-established within political anthropology, and among feminist anthropologists in particular, that the binary divisions of public against domestic and state against society are not naturally existing divisions of society, but rather are moral forms often pressed into the service of governance. In this section I put this insight into conversation with a growing body of literature that has sought to problematise the study of sovereignty. These authors look to understand the functioning of sovereignty as a lived discourse, in place of seeking to understand a metaphysical essence. Ideas of sovereignty frequently make their way into agroecologists’ conversations, most frequently in terms of food sovereignty. Sovereignty also forms a central pillar of Peronist ideology. Here I look to the way in which ideas of sovereignty

and the domestic/domestication create resonances between populist and agroecological thought, as a means to understand how populist ideology is fomented in and through the household.

By denaturalising the binary divisions that structure society into domains of public and domestic, or civil and state, anthropologists and other social theorists have been able to demonstrate the way in which ostensibly non-political social forms can operate as instruments of governance. Yanagisako and Collier (1987) suggest that the separate domains of social life are not functionally based, but exist as the outcomes of social and symbolic processes and have tangible results for the naturalisation of inequality. Elsewhere the pair, along with Michelle Rosaldo, characterise “The Family” as one such reified institution, ideologically associated with the modern state (Collier, Rosaldo, and Yanagisako 1997). Jessica Cattelino (2011) ethnographically tracks the hard social and bureaucratic work entailed in demarcating domains’ boundaries between government, family, and business as the Seminole Tribal government branches out into commercial enterprises. More telling of the coercive nature of such divisions, Hickel’s ethnographic work (2015) demonstrates that the gender and kinship relations of Black South Africans, while conceptualised as traditional, were in fact instantiated by the apartheid state as a means of social control.

Where “the domestic” is a site in which politics happens, “domestication” is a political process which makes use of the cultural salience of “the domestic” while also mobilising the labour and resources of domestic units toward the realisation of political ends. Lorraine Daston (1987) explicates the concept of “domestication” through her work on the development of the insurance industry in early modern England. She suggests that domestication entails not just taming something, but also subsuming that thing into the domestic space. In what she calls “the domestication of risk,” she demonstrates how emerging technologies of probabilistic mathematics interacted with changing societal values in such a way as to bring “risk” into the domestic realm as an element in family livelihood planning. In Argentina the domestic was similarly mobilized under the neoliberal project in Argentina as prosecuted by Menem in the 1990s, as demonstrated by Elana Shever (2012). Shever argues that the wave of privatisations entailed enlisting families as sites of entrepreneurial possibility; in particular, her ethnography discusses the privatisation of the state petroleum company YPF, and the proliferation of sub-contracted labour firms based around the familial relations of former state workers. This process could be thought of as the domestication of entrepreneurialism: culturally normative patriarchal domesticity provided a model for how small enterprise should work, while at the

same time domestic units were expected to shoulder the risks and provide the labour involved in running the sub-contracted businesses.

In place of the Menemist project of domesticating entrepreneurialism, within Kirchnerist populism the domestic exists as an operative site and symbol through Argentines come into contact with “sovereignty.” Most commonly in Argentine agroecological circles sovereignty is discussed as it relates to food sovereignty, but, as discussed above with reference to “life,” qualisigns signify beyond bounded experiences to serve within broader evaluative frameworks. As discussed in Chapter Two, the term “food sovereignty” was only loosely defined by those who used it, but combined ideas of informed consent regarding what one ate with an opposition to export agriculture – the claim being that any activities which removed food supplies from Argentina were acting against food sovereignty. Edelman (2014) and Cockburn (2014) suggest that although food sovereignty is commonly associated with NGOs, the discourse emerged from states’ attempts to wrest control over national agricultural sectors. These three elements of food sovereignty all have resonances of the domestic: the family head having the ability to choose what his family eats; a symbolic opposition drawn between domestic markets and foreign ones (with the added suggestion that choosing the latter imperils the former); a strong sovereign state, taming the agricultural sector so as to provide for its citizens. In the rest of this section, I will draw out these resonances and show how they interact with populist ideology.

Food sovereignty was a domestic concern for agroecologists. Anxieties about the qualities of conventionally produced fruit and vegetables purchased at grocers and taken to the familial home were ubiquitous among my interlocutors. Agroecologists would regularly tell me that the foods they produced had “*un gusto saludable*” (a healthy taste) or were especially sweet. These embodied qualic experiences were understood in contrast with conventional produce, which had unnatural qualities such as a suspiciously long shelf life; my informants pointed to the production of these foodstuffs as having caused sicknesses and deformities among peri-urban and rural populations. Mario, a young agronomist working with the MCC, was especially concerned with food sovereignty, and aware of his inability to disengage from industrial agriculture. During an interview Mario jumped up from his table, and ushered me into the kitchen. Opening the cupboard, he pulled out onions and potatoes, “produced by agroindustry” he told me. Moving to the fruit-bowl “agro-industrial apples, and these bananas come from Ecuador.” Then, looking up to the shelves above him, he pulled down a jar of instant coffee. “This coffee comes from the Netherlands!” He explained that even people such as himself, educated and conscientious, cannot escape industrial agriculture invading homes.

To understand the political implications of Mario's assessment of his own lack of food sovereignty, it is worth engaging with a recent spate of scholarship that has sought to reframe how anthropology approaches sovereignty. Rather than attend to sovereignty as an already existing metaphysical force, Yarimar Bonilla (2017) argues that political anthropologists should see it as a western intellectual import and study the emic logics which have been built around the concept. Likewise, Juliet Erazo describes sovereignty as "more process than product" (2013, 2). Both Erazo (2013) and Cattelino (2008) push back against a view of sovereignty as associated exclusively with the nation-state; rather, both see sovereignty as made and experienced through engagements between state, semi-state, corporate and NGO bodies, and residents of the "sovereign" polity. Working in Haiti, Chelsey Kivland (2020a) shows that while sovereignty is made through non-state actors, this does not necessarily imply a competition with the state. Kivland points to armed gangs as not only providing services normatively associated with states to under-serviced communities, but also actively militating for greater state presence in such communities. Looking to the emic meanings of sovereignty, and appreciating it as neither wholly of the state, nor as a state power which civil society seeks to limit, enables us to better understand how sovereignty exists for Argentine agroecologists, and how it was ideologically linked with the domestic/domestication.

Kath Weston (2017) also investigates quotidian experiences of sovereignty, and her characterisation of living with radiation in the wake of the 2011 Fukushima disaster as an assault on sovereignty is particularly germane to understanding Argentine agroecologists' relationship with conventional agriculture. The diffuse, somatically imperceptible nature of radiation challenged citizens' ability to assess danger in places which they once knew. The boom in apps which could turn a phone into a makeshift Geiger counter, and a genre of online video in which irradiation levels would be mapped throughout cities represented, for Weston, a seizing of "the means of perception," an act which she characterizes as a reassertion of sovereignty through the ability to know danger (2017, 84). Agroecologists too, sought to reassert sovereignty within familiar places against a similarly diffuse toxic threat. While agroecologists had no control over the chemical load deposited in their rural and peri-urban communities, they were able to begin to assert control over the foods which they consumed; although as Mario was keen to point out, this control was still compromised. Mario's conflation of potentially poisonous foods with foreign ones is a hint towards the affinities between agroecology and populism's shared concerns around sovereignty and the domestic. Mario desired safe foods, and to support Argentine economies. Both of these desires were unrealisable, however, and the goods in his kitchen served as proof of this lack of sovereignty and porous borders, both national and somatic. In the exact sort of evaluative micro-interaction

which I have argued is characteristic of ideological commitments, “the domestic” is seamlessly scaled up by Mario, done so with and through the use material foodstuffs.

Ideas of “the domestic” were commonly scaled-up like this, as they featured in agroecologists critiques of the Macri government’s approach to agriculture, which was laissez-faire both in its treatment of potentially poisonous agrochemicals, and its policy of lowering export taxes. The latter stood in particular contrast with Kirchner-era agricultural policy, which used taxes on soy exports to fund expansive social welfare spending (Richardson 2009). The 2008 conflict between Fernández de Kirchner and the industrial agricultural sector which I mentioned in the previous chapter further explains how the populist project made use of the domestic to redefine and redeploy a qualisign of sovereignty.

When in 2008 the government of Cristina Fernández de Kirchner attempted to institute a floating tax rate on soy exports it sparked a four-month long conflict with the agricultural sector, characterised by strikes and road-blockages, concentrated around (although not limited to) south-east Córdoba. The conflict was cast by Fernández de Kirchner and her allies as a struggle between the democratic will of the people, and an anti-democratic oligarchy attempting to subvert that will. Conventional agricultural producers resisting tax-hikes were likened to the perpetrators of the 1976 coup d’état that led to the last military dictatorship. Those who aligned themselves with Fernández de Kirchner portrayed themselves as standing up for the democratic will and for a steady supply of food for the domestic market. Figure 5. reads “No to hunger, no to coup d’états (*golpismo*), open the highways NOW!!!” Similarly, figure 6. states “On the first [of the month], everyone to the plaza to guarantee supply and the nourishment of the people (*el pueblo*)” and in figure 7. – the reverse side of the figure 6. pamphlet – again links concerns of food supply and suggestions that the industrial agricultural sector was engaged in anti-democratic behaviour, stating “no more destabilization, no more *desabastecimiento* (threatening the food supply). Activists supporting Fernández de Kirchner understood the show-down between her government and the agricultural sector as one in which the sovereignty of the state was threatened, and they rallied to support the state’s sovereignty as they saw it as central to their own domestic concerns.



Figure 5: Todos a Plaza de Mayo. Credit: CEDINCI, carpeta 43.



Figure 6: pamphlet MPdM 1. Credit: CEDINCI, carpeta 43.

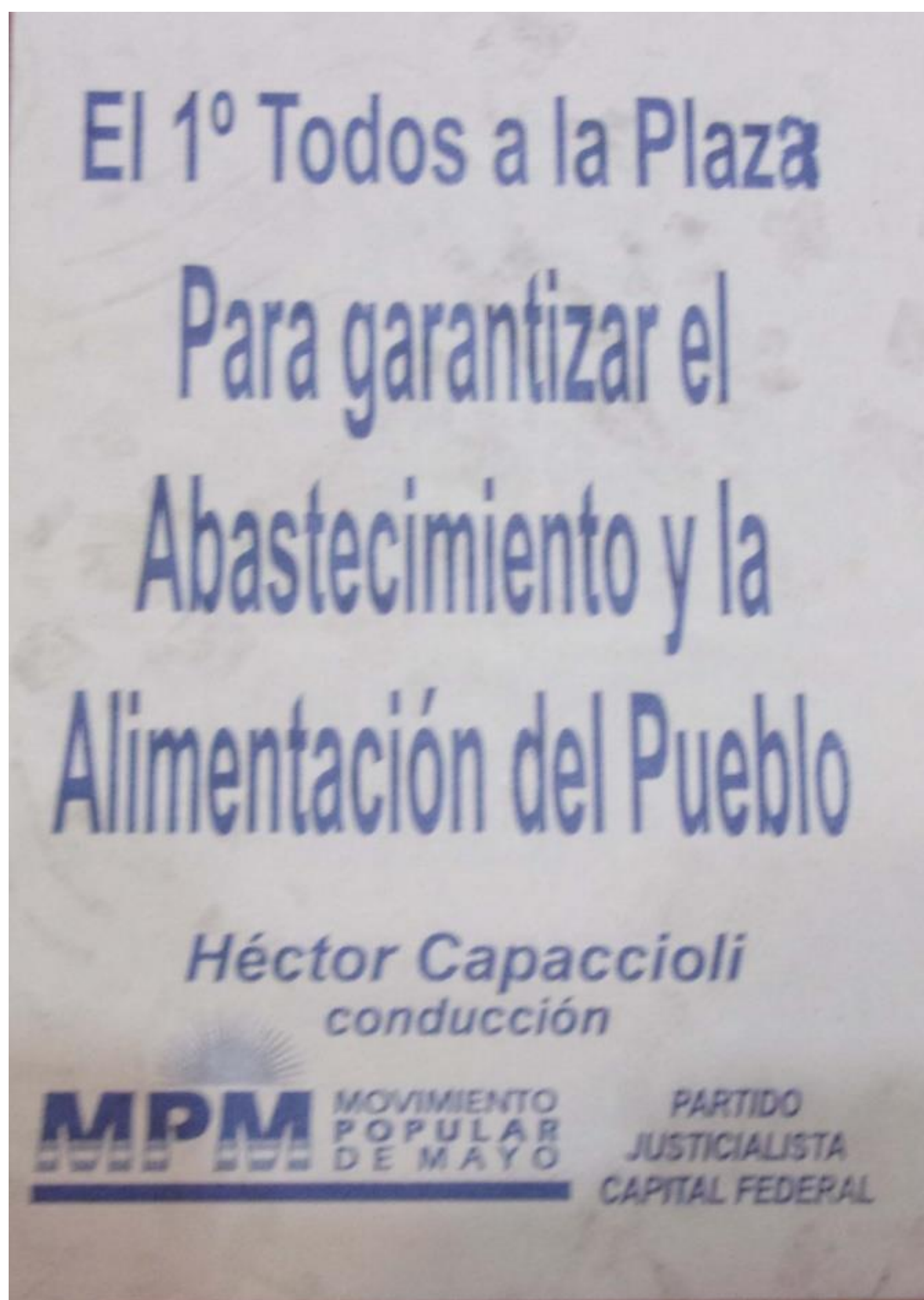


Figure 7: pamphlet MPdM 2. Credit: CEDINCI, carpeta 43.

Fernández de Kirchner likewise emphasised the supposed threats to domestic food supply that the strikes represented, as she used distinctly populist logics to dismiss their claims. Drawing a contrast with the piquetero movements of unemployed Argentines which had been a feature of urban life in Argentina during the millennial economic crisis, Fernández de Kirchner referred to the strikes as “piquetes (roadblocks) of abundance, piquetes of the most profitable sector” (Fernández de Kirchner 2008). She continued with this contrast, noting that while even the poorest, unemployed Argentine supports state spending through the IVA consumption tax, the agricultural sector lacked solidarity, jealously refusing to contribute by means of the proposed export taxes. Fernández de Kirchner brought home, quite literally, the stakes of the conflict for Argentine families, when she declared: “If it weren’t for export taxes, I want to tell all Argentines, you would be seeing chicken, beef, and milk only through the television” (25 March 2008). By pointing to the strength of the agricultural sector, and invoking these quotidian concerns, Fernández de Kirchner cast herself as a protagonist whose government was taking on the excessive power of industrial agriculture and redistributing that power to feed Argentine households.

Through the way that Fernández de Kirchner and her allies framed this conflict the government’s relationship to industrial agriculture was made a domestic concern. Kirchnerists engaged in an act of domestication: the cultural salience of the domestic unit was mobilised in Kirchnerist discourse, and voters came to understand taxation policy through their own domestic unit’s access to consumer goods and government services. Beyond the immediate support this act of domestication might have won Fernández de Kirchner in her conflict with agro industry, making taxation policy perceptible in domestic spaces through consumer products enabled the exact sort of “micros” which drive political subjectivation. That domestication featured as a political strategy in both Menemist neoliberalism and Kirchnerist populism might be taken to indicate continuities between the regimes, but in fact the differing ways in which the domestic was figured is telling of their differences and of the dynamics of populism. Menem asked families to share in the responsibility of Argentine economic travails; the self-interested domestic unit would help Argentina escape a mess of its own creation. By contrast, the domestic within Kirchnerism was vulnerable. It was a unit under attack from foreign forces and their local collaborators, in need of the protection that only Kirchnerism would provide.

In the few existing anthropological studies of populism that do discuss materials as part of the generation of political sentiments, “the household” is a key site of analysis. Kari Dahlgren discusses domestication as a sense of human control over the non-human in Australia (2019).

The home is a privileged site for experiencing this domestication (or, as is increasingly the case with her interlocutors, its lack) due to both settler-colonial imagery of homesteads conquering wilderness, as well as the home's importance as a locus of sentiments of belonging (2019, 210). The loss of this sense of domestic(ated) stability in the face of labour and environmental precarity, both indexed by abandoned houses and unkept lawns, is for Dahlgren, a driving factor behind her interlocutors' increasing embrace of right-wing, populism as promoted by Pauline Hanson's "One Nation" Party. Ana Carolina Balthazar (2017) similarly focuses on domestic spaces as a means to understand populist thought. Balthazar argues that for some "Leave" voters in the 2016 "Brexit" referendum, voting decisions were made on "a logic of connections and attachments" (2017, 223). For Balthazar, Edwardian period houses themselves, as well as domestic goods such as teacups – both of which were replete with memories of shared class and national struggle – were the material through which such affective connections to the past were made, as well as serving as the basis for a criteria of evaluation through which appraisals of historical and political change were made.

The domestic is both site and symbol in populist ideology. While the domestic sphere has been constructed in western society as ostensibly beyond politics, it is in fact an important factor in political subjectivation. The domestic indexes the immediacy and intimacy with which my interlocutors experienced foodstuffs, and raised the stakes of these encounters to existential levels. In Dahlgren's (2019) study, an increasing lack of control over nature – that is, a crumbling domestication – was generative of populist sentiments among her interlocutors. By contrast, for my participants, nature was not uncontrollable but rather beyond *their* control – subject as they were to the developments of industrial-agriculture against which they had little recourse beyond their diets. The physical objects that populated the domestic spaces of my interlocutors were both source of symbols of their vulnerability, their lack of sovereignty, and as per Robert Samet (2019), even their victimhood. To return to my discussion of Peircean semiotics, the domestic was the site in which agroecologists experienced the qualia of agroecological and conventional foodstuffs, and also – both due to this placement and its repeated invocation in Kirchnerist discourse – formed an integral part of the qualisigns such qualia gave rise to, and in turn to the political commitments of agroecologists.

Conclusion

I began this chapter by admitting the sense of confusion I felt when confronted with the anger that engaging with agroecological plants and soils seemed to provoke in my interlocutors. It was easy to comprehend the sense of peace and tranquillity that Luis told me he experienced on the farm. Many who have worked on farms or in gardens would have experienced a similar

affective force to that which Luis felt. And yet it was the same materials and processes that provoked in Luis and many others like him feelings of anger, hostility towards conventional (and even organic farming), or, as was the case with Leanora, simply an overwhelming sadness.

To understand the generation of these more negative emotions, I have laid out the formation of agroecology as a learned disposition towards the ecologies in which my interlocutors live. Through intense tactile encounters with agroecological matter, subjects are primed to be affected by the material things of nature and to develop a collective ethical-political commitment informed by that affective encounter.

In those primed to see it, intense engagement with agricultural space lays bare the history (which I discuss in Chapter One) with which such places and objects are invested; a history of rural oligarchies and subversion of the democratic will, of labour struggles and inclusionary politics, followed by downwards mobility for the lower-middle and working class, increased precarity and a loss of sovereignty. The meaning that Argentine environments (both agroecological farms and peri-urban households) carry with them underlines more recent experiences of exclusion and existential fear.

I have argued in this chapter that populism should be understood as an ideology; I have rejected liberalist and other idealist interpretations of populism and argued for the influence of material things in populist subjectivation. Recognising the role played by material things in generating the sentiments that underpin Kirchnerist political identification and mobilisation should be crucial to how we understand populism. Populism has often been dismissed as mere rhetoric and its publics have been positioned as naïve and ill-educated, unaware of which form of government is really in their best interest. Rather than discursive reductionism, my approach has been to take populist commitments seriously by analysing encounters with the material that foment such commitments. The material things of populism belie suggestions that populism is purely discursive. They also provide a means to ethnographically approach populism as a problem for anthropological analysis, viewing people's engagement with them as a way to explore populism's functioning and the meaning they hold and refract as a way to understand populism's deeply, and sincerely felt appeal.

In the next chapter I turn to what I see as a second half of the liberal double-bind regarding populism. In this chapter I have discussed – and countered – liberal depictions of populism as too discursive. In the chapter that follows I show how populism has been constructed by liberal, as well as more radical thinkers, as too embodied.

Chapter Four

The Bodies of Populism

Introduction

In the late morning at the intersection of Boulevard Chacabuco and Boulevard Arturo Umberto Illia, two of the main thoroughfares which bisect in central Córdoba, a crowd began to gather. Busses carrying passengers from the outer suburbs and exurbs of the city started to arrive. Colourful twelve-foot-high banners, many stamped with the faces of Juan Perón or his second wife Eva, were unfurled. Utes transporting drums and loudspeakers were unloaded under the row of trees that had persevered to live amid the sun scorched concrete of Córdoba's city centre.

I navigated through the various groupings – all subsets of the Confederación de Trabajadores de la Economía Popular (CTEP) – to find my friends. Traffic was still nosing its way through the crowd on Chacabuco as I helped my interlocutors set up for the march, which had been organised to pressure the national government into supporting the proposed federal *Ley de la Economía Popular*. This would mandate that the federal state purchase goods produced by organised informal worker collectives – such as Huerta Maipú, and others gathered under the umbrella of CTEP.

As the crowd grew denser a car haltingly tried to make its way past us. Nicolás, a tall, dark-skinned member of the agroecological collective in his early twenties, spotted the driver. Playing up his size – as well as being tall, Nicolás was also somewhat overweight – he exaggeratedly hopped back and forth from one foot to the other, arms outstretched, moving rapidly toward the car. As he drew nearer Nicolás let out a cartoonish “Holaaaaaa!” accompanied by an equally comical wave. Meanwhile, the car's driver had seemingly overcome the concern that had caused his stop-start crawl, and took off at speed down the hill upon which Boulevard Chacabuco runs. Nicolás turned around to be greeted by the encouraging laughter of his friends and fellow marchers.



Figure 8: Nicolás beats a drum at the front of the Peronist march

I had been tasked by my interlocutors with photographing Huerta Maipú's delegation to the march. As I took photos, my interlocutors posed with raised fists to show their commitment to shared struggle, or alternatively stood in groups, arms flung over shoulders or around waists, smiling as they enjoyed the exuberant atmosphere they, and their fellow marchers, were co-creating. I had been told to make sure that I took photos of Manuel, one of the collective's founders, who was soon to launch a campaign for a seat on the municipal council of Maipú. I later learned my photos of Manuel appearing to lead the march were used in promotional material for this political campaign.

From Boulevard Arturo Umberto Illia the march travelled north, down the sloping Chacabuco. The crowd then turned west to march through the central Plaza San Martín. Past the neo-Baroque buildings, the type that house bank branches all throughout Argentina. Past the seventeenth century *Cabildo* – the seat of the province's colonial-era government, and past the adjacent cathedral. The crowd continued west towards the *cañada*, while I walked with Fernando and Enzo. As we walked along a narrow sidewalk a well-dressed, elderly couple passed by, coming from the opposite direction. The pair moved quickly out of the way so as to not share the footpath with Enzo. The couple avoided eye contact but wore a stern look of disgust on their faces. Enzo turned to Fernando and me and laughed, "*Me gusta ver las caras*

de la gente, así" (I like to see the faces of the people, like this). Enzo pulled a face of mock horror, imitating the elderly pair.



Figure 9: The march passes into Plaza San Martín

The march was followed by the usual, desultory speeches. Demands were made against the city, provincial, and federal governments as the crowd steadily waned. Having separated from the rest of our cohort, my friends asked me to lead them back to the central point from which the group had agreed they would collectively depart.

Throughout this chapter I return to this scene as I further explore the place of bodies and crowds in academic, Peronist and anti-Peronist assessments of populism. The behaviour of Nicolás and Enzo was undoubtedly threatening to its targets, just as it was a source of enjoyment to the men themselves. I unpack the meaning invested in the racialised and classed relations between the crowd and the crowd's other, as well as how the face-to-face interactions I discuss were in themselves events creating meaning. To do this I continue to draw upon the Peircean semiotic theory, which I discussed in the previous chapter. Whereas the last chapter treated the body as the seat of qualic experience, this chapter treats the body itself (and bodies collectively) as qualisign. These qualisigns are read and interpreted by both populists and anti-populists. I begin, then, by providing an overview of the crowd in recent Argentine history. Following this, I explore the place of the body and of crowds in social analysts' critiques of

populism. The Argentine context of anti-Peronism demonstrates the shortcomings of readings of populism in which analysts focus on the embodied, affective responses of political subjects addressed by populist leaders. The focus such analysts pay to bodies is mirrored in the clearly exclusionary and racist discourse of Argentine liberals regarding Peronist crowds. After discussing their interpretations by Argentine anti-Peronists, I continue to explore bodies and crowds as qualisigns but turn my attention to the meaning of bodiliness for populists themselves. I make the case that the crowds of street protests are a powerful qualisign of popular sovereignty for Peronist publics. To understand this dynamic, I explore how qualia can entail the assessment of the embodied experience of others, as the meanings drawn by one party present at an event are cognisant of, and informed by, the meanings drawn by another.

To think through the meanings drawn from, and imposed upon, bodies and crowds as they participate in political demonstrations I take inspiration from an article by Sian Lazar (2015), in which she argues for a symbolic analysis of protest based upon her ethnographic fieldwork in Argentina and Bolivia. Lazar suggests that protests are political rituals and, as such, our understanding of them can benefit from intertextual analysis, an idea she borrows from literary theory. I return to this piece throughout this chapter, as it offers valuable insights into how social analysts should understand the semiotic practices of protest, and highlights in particular the citational element of street marches, and the inherently dialectical relationship between marches' performers and audiences, as central to the semiotics of political action.

In the conclusion I reflect not only on this chapter, but on the preceding chapter as well. Reading these chapters together exposes a double bind of anti-populist, liberal politics. In the previous chapter I discussed critiques of populism which depict it as being too discursive, seen by liberals as nothing but bombast – a claim I countered by pointing towards the material objects through which populist ideological commitments cohere. And while on the one hand populism is claimed to be overly discursive, at the same time it is apparently overly embodied, as I discuss in this chapter. Too ephemeral and too concrete. The two elements of this impossible demand are, however, of a piece, as I will show in the conclusion.

Street politics in Argentina

Before I analyse the meanings attributed to bodies and crowds in Argentine political life, it is important that I underline just how significant and ubiquitous urban political action is in Argentina. A study released in 2010 showed that Argentina had twice the rate of civic participation in protests than the regional average (CELS 2017). Even taking their ubiquity into account, street protests have had an impressive impact upon Argentine political affairs

throughout the last century. Later in this chapter I will discuss what is likely the most well-known mass mobilisation in Argentine history – the October 17, 1945 demonstrations for the release of Perón from military incarceration. Perón is not the only Argentine leader to have had his fate so closely tied to mass mobilisation, however. Crowd demonstrations have been central to the fall of dictators as well as elected presidents. In Córdoba in 1969, fifty thousand people, mainly workers and students, participated in an urban uprising against the Onganía dictatorship known as the *Cordobazo*. The *Cordobazo* is notable for its size, and for the role it is said to have played in the following year's ousting of the dictator. It is also noteworthy that while a large proportion of participants certainly had Peronist ideological tendencies, the *manifestación* (protest) occurred almost entirely outside of the Peronist power structure, and without any influence from Perón himself (Brennan and Gordillo 1994; Robben 2005). The last military junta was quick to impose an order banning street demonstrations during its rule, and the empty streets and plazas have become an evocative symbol of that era (Robben 2005; CELS 2017). Equally evocative, however, are the scenes of mothers gathering in the same plazas demanding the return of their disappeared children. This dictatorship too, eventually fell to crowd demonstrations. In December 2001, massive demonstrations forced the resignation of President Fernando de la Rúa, promptly followed by his infamous fleeing of the Casa Rosada by helicopter. In the following two weeks, three interim presidents resigned due to continued protests.

The authenticity of the sentiments behind crowd mobilisation has been a concern for scholars and for Argentines. Javier Auyero's (2001) analysis of the Menem-era Peronist Party machine includes a discussion of the neighbourhood-block level mobilization of crowds in support of Peronist politicians. While I do see an important qualitative distinction between the populism of the Kirchners and Menemism, there are definitely surface-level similarities with regard to mass mobilisation between the current era and that discussed by Auyero. Most notably the practice of busing in constituents remains true, as does fact that attendees receive financial compensation for their participation in political demonstrations. Unlike during the Menem-era, when such clientelist politics was actioned by functionaries within the Partido Justicialista, during my fieldwork it was ostensibly autonomous social organisations, such as CTEP, that organised attendance.

As was revealed to me in conversations with marchers, and with agroecologists at Huerta Maipú's work meetings, it was these same social organisations that were responsible for paying their members, largely through the *Salario Social Complementario*. This introduces a further important distinction from Auyero's (2001) case study: marchers were not paid directly

to attend demonstrations; rather, they were paid an ongoing wage for their participation in community works through the organisations of which they were a part, and attending marches was one of a number of ways in which SSC recipients could fulfil this work requirement. That a financial interest was involved in marchers' participation did not diminish the extent to which the accumulated crowd could serve to signify popular sovereignty for Peronists. Indeed, rather than see the SSC as a means to artificially promote street-level politics, on multiple occasions my interlocutors expressed exactly the opposite opinion, that the SSC was a concession to the revolutionary potential of "el pueblo" (the people), instituted by the federal government to temper public disruption.

Protest in Argentina is not, nor has it ever been, confined to a single issue or party. While the union movement traditionally played a predominant – although never hegemonic – role in organising protests, the neoliberal policies of the last junta and of the Menem government resulted in such an altered economic environment that unions were no longer the mobilising force they once were (CELS 2017).³⁴ For the already poor, Menem's reforms were particularly painful. As I discussed in Chapter One, a movement known as *piqueteros* emerged to represent unemployed and grey-economy workers. The *piqueteros* became most famous for their strategy of *cortes de ruta* (road blockages) which would take place on important provincial or national transitways, sometimes obstructing traffic for multiple days (Rossi 2017; Benclowicz 2017). *Piqueteros* played an important role in the protests of December 2001, but it was only through the participation of middle-class Argentines, feeling the aftershocks of a decade of neoliberal reform, that the demonstrations had the political ramifications they did.

The middle-class has been active in protests before and since December 2001. Barbara Sutton suggests that *cacerolazos*, in which protestors create a public disruption by loudly banging cookware, have a distinctly middle-class, conservative heritage (2010). The middle-class, despite the affinities of some of its members, were not entirely spared the atrocities of the junta. *Escratches*, a strategy in which those who participated in the atrocities of the junta are publicly named and harassed, similarly involves middle-class Argentines. During the 2008 standoff with Fernández de Kirchner, wealthy soy-farmers self-consciously copied the strategies of *piqueteros*, most notably by blocking transitways. The Argentine anthropologist Gastón Gordillo (2018) reports that during this period then president of the Sociedad Rural Argentina, Raúl Biolcatti, was asked during an interview how the soy-farmer protests differed

³⁴ It is worth noting too, that unions with strong links to the Peronist party preferred to take a collaborative, rather than confrontational, approach during Menem's neoliberal reforms as a way to mitigate the loss of jobs and diminishing work conditions among their members. See Lazar 2017.

from those carried out by piqueteros. Biolcatti responded matter-of-factly that the distinguishing factor was the soy-farmers' skin colour (Gordillo 2016, 262), a response that Gordillo suggests was understood as appropriate by the majority of the country's media outlets, despite its clearly racist sentiment. That such instances of middle and upper-class protest do not draw the same racialised opprobrium as those of Peronists should be telling of the dynamics I draw out throughout this chapter. First, however, I turn to the way in which social theorists have discussed crowds as political actors, and again I do so with an eye to the way in which bodies are racialised by authors in the process of constructing normative models of democratic participation.

The crowd in social theory

Late nineteenth to early twentieth century crowd theory played a critical role in the emergence of disciplinary social science. Christian Borch, from whose work *The Politics of Crowds* (2012) I draw significant inspiration here, suggests that crowds were problematised by sociology. Adopting the Foucauldian sense of problematisation, Borch argues that the emergence of sociology as a distinct academic field occurred through its identification and designation of crowds as a problem. Crowd theory emerged within a deeply conservative intellectual environment, against the backdrop of the social upheaval that swept through Europe in the wake of the 1848 revolutions and the massive growth of cities in North America, powered by immigration. The European sociological tradition in particular was influenced by conservative historiography, such as the work of Hyppolyte Taine that criticised the French revolution and argued instead in favour of a minoritarian government of noblemen (Borch 2012, 30). The "problem" of crowd behaviour was theorised by scholars who were central to the development of social sciences. Thinkers such as Gabriel Tarde, Georg Simmel, William McDougall – a social psychologist who accompanied the Rivers fieldtrip to the Torres Strait – Sigmund Freud, and Emile Durkheim, all contributed work addressing the "problem" of crowds (McClelland 1989; Mazzarella 2010; Borch 2012).³⁵

The early theorisation of crowd behaviour was almost universally disparaging towards crowds, and focused on the moral and intellectual failings of crowd members. Crowds were thought of as scenes of irrationality and mania; the emotions, or mental afflictions of crowd members, were said to be contagious (Laclau 2005). Durkheim, who initially distanced himself from crowd theory, still ascribed to its anti-popular depictions of mass-movements, writing: "We know in

³⁵ The works of Freud and Durkheim were qualitatively different to those of "crowd theorists." Indeed both sought to distance themselves from this body of literature. As I discuss later in this section both still drew upon the ideas of crowd theory, and both reiterated its anti-popular sentiments.

fact that the mutual reactions of men in assembly may transform a gathering of peaceful citizens into a fearful monster” (Durkheim quoted in Borch 2012, 65).³⁶ Various different theories were developed to explain the hysteria of crowds, but taken as granted within the literature was the axiom that upon entering a crowd a subject would lose something of themselves, surrender their individuality, which was understood as the basis of all rationality to the excitement/suggestion/hypnosis/mental contagion of the mass.

Mental weakness was explained in part through a somatic lens. Crowds were depicted as feminine (due to women’s presumed susceptibility to hysteria). An early social Darwinism was invoked, and analogies were drawn between the behaviour of crowds and non-European peoples. In North America, not only were non-Anglo-Saxon immigrant communities seen as more likely to partake in mob-like behaviour, but the grime of the cities to which they were moving was also considered to engender a “mental contagion” (Borch 2012, 136-39). William Mazzarella suggests that this focus on bodies might be better understood as a more general view of politics in which bodies corrupt political thought, he writes: “the relation between reason and flesh is in the first instance imagined in zero-sum terms; the more there is of one, the less there is of the other.” (2010, 703).

Proponents of crowd theory were also responsible for the division of “crowd” from “public”, making them alternative forms of collective association. Gabriel Tarde invoked socio-evolutionary theory to suggest that publics were a hierarchically superior form of association than crowds. He noted: “The crowd... is a collection of psychic connections produced essentially by physical contacts” (Tarde quoted in Broch 2012, 59), whereas the public was not based upon proximity, but rather a more intellectual stage of human evolution. This division would help frame the anti-popular claims of crowd theorists by providing a language through which negative stereotypes of the crowd could be contrasted with the “proper” form of political association.

Crowd theory and all its outdated prejudices, Ernesto Laclau argues, are the touchstone for modern anti-populist political theorists. In his work *On Populist Reason* (2005) Laclau identifies crowd theory as central to the intellectual genealogy that informs contemporary anti-populist social theory. Citing political theorists’ claims that populism is vague, ill-formed, manipulative,

³⁶ This quote, which is followed by the quip “What a strange imitation to produce such metamorphoses” (Durkheim quoted in Borch 2012, 65) was in fact aimed at disproving Tarde’s analytics of “suggestion” and imitation”. While here, Durkheim is positioning himself outside of crowd theory, he is still accepting its premise, that crowds are violent and mentally diminished. His later work, particularly *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* drew extensively on similar analytics however, and generated a controversy among followers of Durkheimian sociology.

and effectively mass-Ludditism, Laclau writes: “This relegation has been possible only because, from the very beginning, a strong ethical condemnation has been present in the consideration of populist movements... its dismissal has been part of a discursive construction of a certain normality, of an aesthetic political universe from which its dangerous logics had to be excluded” (2005, 19). Anti-populism, then, relies upon ideas that are profoundly anti-popular. These ideas based upon norms of political communication developed throughout the second half of the nineteenth-century replete with class and racial prejudices.

By limiting discussion of the intellectual forerunners of anti-populism to politically conservative crowd theorists, Laclau ends his discussion prematurely. Radical European thinkers and North American liberals alike have continued to argue that emotional excess leads to undemocratic impulses characteristic of mass-politics (Hosftadter 1965; Spragens 1990). Theodore Adorno, for instance, revitalises Freud’s *Group Psychology* to analyse fascist propaganda (1982). Freud’s work sits ambiguously within crowd theory, as he refuted hypnotism as a mechanism by which crowds’ sentiments could be excited, delimiting the term to describe an interaction between two individuals (McClelland 1989, 262). Adorno, despite his leftist affinities, returned to the older, more anti-popular position of crowd theorists by remarking that “The leaders’ appropriation of mass psychology, the streamlining of their technique, has enabled them to collectivize the hypnotic spell” (Adorno 1982, 137). Although this work was specifically about fascism, Adorno drew upon and reinscribed anti-popular concepts such as crowds’ submission to leaders, and the false dichotomy between emotion and political reason.

Within anthropology, which developed disciplinary coherence alongside sociology and psychology, the focus on an atmosphere of excitement which early studies of crowds emphasise fits neatly with the discipline’s longstanding interest in “collective effervescence,” and has likewise shaped how populism is understood.³⁷ The emotional or affective elements of populism tend to dominate anthropological analyses, with emotion figuring alternatively as: populism’s characteristic feature; central to populist mobilisation; or even part of what defines populism (Blom Hansen 2001; Michelutti 2013; Sánchez 2016; Seo 2019). Michelutti (2013), for instance, suggests that the charisma of populist leaders become framed through ideas of morality and of kinship to forge a relationship between the leader and their constituency, and

³⁷ Sara Ahmed (2010, 40) acknowledges that her “outside in” theory of affect has antecedents in crowd psychology. Similarly, William Mazzarella (2013) suggests a fundamental commonality between what his understanding of affect and Emile Durkheim’s discussion of societies’ “collective effervescence.” Durkheim made his academic name rejecting the sociological approach of crowd theorist Gabriel Tarde, and the ascendance of Durkheimian sociology would lead to crowd theory as an area of study falling out of vogue in France. Borch (2012), however, demonstrates that Durkheim adopted much of earlier crowd theory’s insights when discussing the power of collectives, especially in his later work and most notably in *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*. This included revising his earlier theory to emphasise the role of the leader in crowd sentiments.

in doing so an affectively charged biomoral bond constitutes the populist collective. Attending to the affective elements of populist politics is not in itself a problem. Attending solely to the affective elements of populism, however, not only fails to engage with populists' genuine political aims, but also reinscribes the singularisation of mass-politics as somehow more emotional than other modes of political organization and ideological forms. The emotionality of populism is then used by other authors to characterise it as illegitimate. Rosalind Morris, for instance, suggests that populist politics motivates crowds by spectacle, and not reason: "In the present conjuncture, visibility threatens to displace and not merely supplement audibility and legibility" (2013, 101). The supposed illegitimacy of emotion in politics is perhaps best demonstrated by Jean Comaroff, who characterises populism as "excitable speech" (2011, 100). This excitement is contrasted with a supposedly more real political action: "The white heat of populism has never been enough to power meaningful transformation. This is because populism thrives on radical reductionism... In place of analysis of social and historical circumstances (that analysis being dubbed 'unpatriotic,' 'elitist') populism relies on more immediate emotive dualisms" (2011, 104-5).

As well as reinscribing a dichotomy of emotion against reason, with Comaroff we see something of the old political elitism of crowd theorists replicated, such technocratic elitism is common amongst modern anti-populist writers. Despite its organization of historically marginalized people, the arguments go, populism cannot truly liberate them – a more nuanced political assessment (such as that promoted by the theorist) is what is really needed (Comaroff 2011; Žižek 2006; Swyngedouw 2010). Jon Beasley-Murray (2010) celebrates affect for its unruly, liberatory potential, but suggests that populism – and Peronism in particular – transforms that affect into a politically demobilizing "sentiment" whereby the loyalty of the population is captured, and systemic change becomes impossible (see also Hardt and Negri 2005).

Normatively organising politics around the dichotomies of emotional/rational, embodied/intellectual, crowd/public is exclusionary and also represents a narrow understanding of the variety of political action. Feminist studies have long shown how the denigration of emotion and bodies functions to exclude women from positions of authority (Haraway 1988; Young 2000; De Goede 2000). Working in India, the political anthropologist Francis Cody (2015) similarly notes the exclusionary aspect of the liberal demarcation of the public sphere. He suggests that for "people who cannot imagine themselves as unmarked by race, gender, or sexuality – those who are excessively embodied, as it were" (2015, 50), participation in this liberal fantasy is not possible. Importantly, he also suggests that

participation in a public sphere, configured as liberalism imagines, is wholly undesirable for these “excessively embodied” subjects. Cody problematises the liberal fantasy of a political sphere inhabited by a disembodied “reading public” that relates to one another through a “stranger sociality” – that is, a polity in which members are stripped of their social identities and relations, and relate to one another as abstracted, imagined “citizens”. Adherence to this model not only marginalises already disadvantaged subjects. It also fails to engage with nonconforming, subaltern modes of political activity and organisation (including mass demonstrations), with liberal theorists instead choosing to “restrict our understanding of politics to a tradition solely derived from Greco-Roman conceptions of the polis” (Cody 2015, 63).

A pervasive liberalism underwrites academic animosity towards populism and crowd politics. Although the critics of populism and crowd politics who I have discussed are certainly not uniformly liberals, the normative separation they promote between emotion on the one hand, and a disembodied, rational public sphere on the other, is based in a Euro-American liberalism inspired by neoclassical imaginings of western European antiquity. I have begun to point towards the undemocratic aspects of this understanding of the political. In the next section I demonstrate the truly exclusionary nature of this theory of politics by discussing its manifestation in Argentina, where an obsessive focus on bodies has always accompanied liberalism as a means to discredit its more popularly supported political alternatives.

Bodies in anti-Peronism

In Chapter Two I discussed the deeply divided nature of Argentine political culture; since the 1940s, the most salient political-cultural division has been between Peronists and anti-Peronists. The intra-communal animosity Argentines feel for one another has far outlived Perón himself, but it was also present in Argentine politics long before he made himself a national figure. Bodies have consistently been used to signify the imagined qualities of political opponents throughout the history of this national political divide. Indeed, a clear through line can be drawn linking the tropes used by liberals during the mid-nineteenth century Argentine civil war era, anti-Peronists during the 1940s and 1950s, and anti-Kirchnerists in the modern period. In this section I dive deeper into the modern political division in Argentina, before thinking through the semiotic work of bodies in anti-populist politics. That the critique offered by one section of the Argentine public against populist mobilisation should closely resemble the tenets of crowd theory I have discussed above is not a coincidence. Anti-Peronists in Argentina largely view themselves as members of a liberal tradition – intermittently interrupted by populist governance. Further, crowd theory itself was influential in Argentina during its turn of the century period of urban growth. The 1899 publication *The Argentine Crowds* by the

physician José María Ramos Mejía, for example, applied the most anti-popular of crowd theory to the local context (Ramos Mejía 2002; Robben 2005).

Peronism/anti-Peronism and its modern iteration Kirchnerism/anti-Kirchnerism are totalising identities that structure the political landscape in Argentina. Of the antagonisms that characterise Argentine civic life, Sian Lazar writes: “From the first Perón presidency, Peronism has profoundly shaped Argentine politics to the extent that one could even suggest that the most salient political and even cultural division in Argentina from the mid-twentieth century has been between Peronists and anti-Peronists ... Peronism is more than the PJ [Partido Justicialista] and the Peronist trade unions, more than ‘mere’ pragmatic populism. It is also a social, cultural, and political identity” (2017, 44–45). During the Fernández de Kirchner presidency (2007–2015), this civic antagonism became known as “*la grieta*” (the rift), a phenomenon similar to that of “polarisation” as has occurred in the United States over the past two decades. First popularised by the conservative journalist Jorge Lanata, the term “*la grieta*” aimed to describe an “irreconcilable division in Argentina” that was turning ordinary Argentines against one another on the basis of their votes (Lanata, in Fuentes 2020). For anti-Peronists, *la grieta* was the result of Fernández de Kirchner’s increasingly authoritarian policies combined with her confrontational personal style, which were supposedly internalised by her gullible supporters. For Peronists, it was attributable to a concerted press campaign against Fernández de Kirchner, in large part as retribution for her reform of the media sector, and eagerly bought into by liberals who wanted to maintain their class and racial privileges.

La grieta outlived the Kirchner presidencies; during my fieldwork it existed as both a term of public self-diagnosis and as an ordering principle of social life. Peronists I knew, regardless of racial or class background, expressed a loathing for supporters of the then president Mauricio Macri. At lunch one day, my close friend Álvaro, who stood out in Argentina for his height and Germanic features, and who was raised in an upper-middle class household, spoke with contempt about a group seated at a nearby table. Álvaro suggested a group like this one must be “*macristas*,” citing their Porteño accents and the fact that they were “*rubios*” (literally blondes, but used to describe light skinned Argentines more broadly). While Álvaro, himself a Peronist and arguably *rubio*, certainly did not believe all white skinned Argentines supported Macri, he did subscribe to a racial-political geography that used whiteness as existing in an indexical relationship with conservative political commitments.

This hatred, as well as the use of racialised bodies as signifiers of political commitments, was reciprocated by anti-Peronists. Even prior to Perón, Argentine liberal politics had established

an association between racialised bodies, crowds, and illiberal violence. Aguilo points to “*The Slaughter Yard*”, by the early nineteenth century liberal, Esteban Echeverría, as establishing this association in Argentine political culture (2019). In the short story, a mob of dark-skinned supporters of the dictator, Juan Manuel de Rosas, are driven mad by a young man’s refusal to submit to Rosas’ cult of personality and, as a group, violently murder the man. As noted by cultural historians of Peronism, this trope of a dark skinned, illiberal mob as a threat to the nation’s democracy was repeated throughout the 1940s and 1950s. Social analysts of Argentina such as Emanuela Gauno (2003), and Natalia Milanese (2010) demonstrate that anti-Peronist liberals’ concerns over the Peronist support base were similarly corporeal. Gauno writes: “The backing of Perón by the lower class became yet another proof [for the urban middle class] of the essential barbarism of Argentina’s nonwhite population: their incapability to participate in “modern” politics, and their vulnerability to populist demagoguery” (2003, 150).

In the lead up to the 2019 presidential election, this racial trope was again utilised by Argentine liberals. Figure 10. is a screen grab from a minor social media celebrity’s Facebook page. It shows a dark-skinned woman protesting against the government’s austerity programs – the suggested humour of the picture being that the woman, who is large bodied, is wearing a shirt that reads “MACRI NOS MATA DE HAMBRE” (Macri is killing us with hunger).



Figure 10: Macri nos mata de hambre. Credit: Facebook, screenshot by author, 2019

Following the defeat of Macri, I saw similar posts from right-wing acquaintances. One sarcastically read: “I bet that if Macri had won, *todos los monos* (all of the monkeys, a term that carries the same racist meanings in Argentine Spanish as it does in English) would be in

the street asking for Christmas and end-of-year payments because they could not survive the hunger. But Alberto [Fernández] won, and as if by magic there is no more hunger.” The online comments section of *Clarín*, a conservative newspaper with one of Argentina’s largest readerships, provides similar points of view. A story about a disruption to Buenos Aires’ transport system caused by a demonstration of retrenched train workers attracted the comment: “Fuck them. Now they’ve got what they voted for [a reference to the election of Alberto Fernández] and this has just started. Wait until the money runs out for social plans and choripan.” Choripán is an Argentine sausage in a bun; it is one of the few widely available foods sold by street vendors in Argentina, and is a cheap, fatty (and delicious) food associated with working class culture. The commenter’s reference is an illusion to the widely held belief that Peronist crowds are bribed into existence through the offer of the meal. A report about a similar action the week prior was met with similar, if more brazen, comments: “They can go fuck themselves. Negros”, and from a different reader in reference to a video embedded in the story: “Punish them... they are ANIMALS! They even share the same skin colour [as animals]!”³⁸

The crowd that gathered at Chacabuco and Arturo Umberto Illia that morning signified a threatening disorder for Argentine anti-Peronists. One of the interventions made by Lazar in her outline of a symbolic approach to protests was that anthropologists take note of the meanings taken from such rituals by their audiences (2015). It is worth, then, returning to the processes of signification I discussed in the previous chapter. Audience members, here, are the crowd’s others: people caught up in, but not choosing to participate in, the march. As I show, their presence is integral to the symbolic dynamics of the manifestación.

For audience members, the individual bodies of protesters, and their collective aggrupation as a crowd, constituted qualisigns. Protest marches are thoroughly sensorial activities (Houston 2015; Kim 2017; Kivland 2020b). The beating of drums and the claustrophobic presence of bodies were felt sensations for the elderly couple who hurried to get out of Enzo’s path. Using the Peircean schema of signs we can understand being an audience member as not simply a thoroughly sensorial (qualitative) experience, but a qualic one: the sensuous qualities of the scene being experienced in tandem with the cultural meanings attached to them. The bodies of the marchers were racially coded, and their (assumed) phenotype was imbued with the history of societal division and supposed illiberal violence I have discussed above. More than

³⁸ See https://www.clarin.com/ciudades/nueva-protesta-sindical-demoras-cancelaciones-tren-roca_0_edgb1lb6.html; and https://www.clarin.com/sociedad/interrumpen-servicio-tren-roca-nuevo-corte-vias-afecta-300-mil-pasajeros_0_i-hLFksf.html

a mere claustrophobia, then, the qualic experience of being an audience member entailed a face-to-face embodiment of the fears and antagonisms constructed around Argentina's racialised "others."

In turn such experiences came to signify disorder among Argentine liberals. Qualia becomes conventionalised so as to signify beyond the immediate encounters in which they occur, and in doing so become qualisigns. Nicholas Harkness explains this dynamic, writing: "As the relationship between multiple qualia and a particular quality is conventionalized, culturally valorized qualisigns emerge as points of orientation in social action... conventional qualisigns are types of qualitative experiences that are widespread, recognizable, and socially effective" (2013, 15). The presence of crowds, their disruption of everyday urban life, their noise, but above all the dark-skinned bodies of which they were comprised, signify (and materialise) disorder.

I have deliberately chosen the word "disorder" here, rather than "lawlessness" or "insecurity", because of its double meaning. In my conversations with anti-Peronists, security and the rule of law were constantly stressed as being at threat should Fernández de Kirchner return to the presidency in 2019. At its most extreme this sentiment manifested in an apologist stance towards the military junta of 1976 to 1983. A Facebook post from an acquaintance in Córdoba featured a photo of Jorge Videla, a leader in the military junta, and was captioned "Say what you will about this man", before listing the supposed security achievements of the dictatorship. Modern-day defences of the dictatorship always contrast the supposed safety with which law-abiding Argentines were able to go about their day's business during the military's rule with the modern situation, which apologists characterise as a state of constant fear. Such an understanding relies, of course, upon viewing the thirty thousand victims of state terror as uniformly Peronist terrorists, an opinion voiced to me by conservative informants. Crowds, within this political outlook, signified a threat to the law and order that Macri's government had tried to assert during its tenure.

Crowds threatened disorder too, in the sense of a potential disordering of Argentina's entrenched racial and class hierarchies. The image of the anti-Macri protester, as well as the other social media and online commentary that I shared above, refers not only directly to the bodies of Peronists – the woman's size in contrast to her political claim; the use of "monos" and "ANIMALS" – but do so as a means to dismiss activists' claims for a more equal Argentina. If individual bodies come to signify the speciousness of Peronists' claims to a more substantive

equality, the crowd as an aggrupation of these bodies is the threatening qualisign for liberals that such equality might be implemented by a future Peronist government.

Despite the affinities which exist between contemporary Argentine liberals and the military dictatorship, it is Peronism which has been more effectively branded as fascism. Daniela Losiggio (2017) explores the way in which Peronism has been equated with fascism, suggesting that a “moralising perspective” (2017, 98) seeks to exclude from legitimate politics the personalistic imagery and spectacle of which Peronism makes use. Losiggio argues that Cristina Fernández de Kirchner invoked imagery of Eva Perón during her rallies in order to garner support, especially during the conflict with soy producers which marked the start of her presidency. Rather than see political imagery as a legitimate, even inevitable, exercise of power, liberals in Argentina saw it as proof of Fernández de Kirchner’s anger, arrogance, and instability – an interpretation promoted especially by the Clarín media group (Losiggio 2017, 115). The divergence from liberal political asceticism, Losiggio notes, enabled anti-Kirchnerists to invoke stereotypes of women which have historically functioned to exclude them from political participation. This is where crowd theory inspired anti-populism, and the exclusionary politics of anti-Peronism converge. The suspicion of emotion and of bodies for which crowd theory and more recent anti-populist thought provide an intellectual wellspring is drawn upon in the Argentine context to exclude those who are, as Cody puts it, “excessively embodied.” The disorderly/disordering Peronist body is always already denied legitimacy, enabling claims made through bodies – either individual or collective – to be dismissed, as in the online posts discussed here.

Bodies as populist qualisigns

For Peronist crowds the qualisign of masses of bodies in protest meant something quite different. Whereas anti-Peronists understood crowds as qualisigns of disorder, for Peronists these same scenes were qualisigns of popular sovereignty. To understand this qualic interpretation, which I unpack here, it is necessary to bear in mind both of the implications Lazar points to as a result of protests being read as ritual texts: that protests are citational and that they are dialectical.

The intertextual, citational practices of the march that I have made the focus of this chapter were explicitly acknowledged by protesters. While we waited for the march to begin, Fernando decided it was necessary to intellectually prepare me for the event. He asked me whether I had ever been to the Casa Rosada, I replied that I had. “There in front is the Plaza de Mayo.” This, Fernando explained, was the focal point for the momentous scenes of October 17, 1945,

when a crowd spontaneously gathered in the square to demand the release of Perón, who had been imprisoned by the military government of which he had been part the week before. The size of the mobilisation, estimated to be up to three hundred thousand people, forced the government to release Perón who, after this demonstration of popular support, continued to accumulate power through the regime and was soon after elected president. This, Fernando stated with pride, was the moment in which street protest first claimed its place in the Argentine political landscape.

The story of October 17 is an important one for Peronists. Not only because it is regarded as the birth of the Peronist movement, but also because it positions the Argentine people as responsible, alongside Perón, for the social reforms that the “New Argentina” of the first Peronist era would usher in. Fernando constructed the populist crowd as an agentive force in Argentine politics. This interpretation of the events of October 17 is widely held by Peronists, although the extent to which it was a spontaneous expression of the will of working Argentines, as opposed to a more cynical manipulation is a matter of genuine historical debate.³⁹ Nevertheless, Fernando was convinced of the historical agency of “el pueblo”. By positioning the Plaza de Mayo in relation to the Casa Rosada, Fernando was implicitly emphasising the people’s political agency as he located the site of innumerable popular demonstrations alongside the seat of executive power.

The sovereignty understood to be being exerted in crowd politics is distinct from, but related to, the sovereignty I discussed in the previous chapter. In the last chapter the sovereignty my interlocutors understood as being compromised by industrial agriculture, and reasserted through agroecological farming, was a national sovereignty, which might be understood as a desire for a strong and active state capable of enforcing its territorial claims against foreign powers, and capable of imposing its will upon non-state actors within the national space. This ideal was informed by a Peronist tradition of industrial protection and economic nationalism, as well as a broader dialogue within the Latin American Left regarding extractivism and neo-colonial United States policy. By contrast, the sovereignty exerted by the crowd was a popular sovereignty, understood as the expression of the power of the people, or a mobilisation against oligarchic rule. Ideas of national and popular sovereignty informed one another in Peronist thought, as demonstrated by the common disavowal of their political enemies as “*vendepatrias*” (literally, those who sell the fatherland), or Osvaldo’s critique of the Argentine rich as “speaking in English”, which I discussed in Chapter Two.

³⁹ See Robben 2005, for an overview of this historical debate

Robert Samet argues that “Populism’s inalienable principle is not sovereignty, but rather popular sovereignty... Populism emerges under conditions in which a fictive ‘people’ is considered the locus of political authority” (2019, 291). Margaret Canovan similarly points to popular sovereignty as central to populist mobilisation (1999). Canovan makes the claim that the in-built inertia of democratic institutions opens the space for populists to depict themselves as expressing popular sovereignty through unmediated, direct action. As in the last chapter, I am not interested in discussing the nature of sovereignty; rather, I follow Yarimar Bonilla’s (2017) imperative that political anthropologists attend to the emic logics that have been built around the western import of “sovereignty”. As with *soberanía nacional* (national sovereignty), *soberanía popular* (popular sovereignty) is a concept that exists within the political lexicon of my interlocutors.

To return to the scene with which I opened this chapter, where my friend, Enzo, moving as part of a crowd, reported a sense of pleasure at seeing the discomfort the march had provoked. Above, I translated Enzo’s statement “Me gusta ver las caras de la gente, así”, as “I like to see the faces of the people, like this,” where “así / like this” referred to a sense of fear which Enzo mocked with his own exaggerated facial expression. If, however, I do not insert a comma into Enzo’s statement and it is left without punctuation as “Me gusta ver las caras de la gente así”, “así” would refer not to the facial expression, but to “gente así” – “people like this.” Elderly, well dressed, light-skinned, urban. People who were not, and would not be, participating in a Peronist manifestación. If we read these two potential sentences together, as I suggest they should be understood, Enzo was not simply saying that he enjoyed the sensation of seeing other people terrified – a sadistic joy which would be out of keeping with the man I got to know during my fieldwork. Rather, Enzo would be saying that he enjoyed seeing his own ability to provoke discomfort in a certain type of person: one whose identity was privileged in Argentine society above, and to the exclusion of, his own.

To include the second translation with the first also means broadening the scope of the signs being interpreted. In the first translation, only the faces of the couple act as signs, and we are only dealing with an indexical sign relation. Enzo sees the faces of the couple, which index a sense of fear and disgust. The second translation involves a wider array of signs. Here the pair’s age, skin colour and clothing are signs. For Enzo, these factors are again indexical, this time of social type: middle or upper class, urban.⁴⁰ There is also, however, an iconic sign

⁴⁰ At first glance, it might be confusing as to why social signifiers are here read as indexes, given that they do not appear to have a natural causal relationship, such as Pierce’s famous example of smoke to fire. This, however, would be an etic view, failing to account for the naturalisation of the relationship of the relationship between certain qualities and social types. As Webb Keane (2018) argues, the recognition of signs entails a set of

relation being interpreted as Enzo made an inference about the character and ideology of the elderly couple based upon their social type. Susan Gal and Judith Irvine name the process whereby indexes are made to function as icons “rhematization” (2019, 19). Thinking through the conjectural steps is illuminating both to understand this process of rhematization and to grasp its implications. In both translation one and two, Enzo is engaging in a conjecture. While indexes involve a natural connection between sign and object, interpreting them is still a process of conjecture as subjects draw upon their knowledge and experiences to interpret them.⁴¹ In translation two, where rhematization occurs, a second conjectural step takes place as the signs of the pair’s social identity and apparent discomfort become signs of something not directly observable, their political allegiances. Three conjectural movements happen in conjunction: Enzo recognizes a social other, he interprets their facial expression and bodily movements, and he speculates on their political commitments.

Enzo’s enjoyment of the couple’s supposed horror suggests that within a given society qualia can not only be interpreted differently, but that varying interpretations themselves play a role in how qualia are experienced. Although Peircean semiotics entails a commitment to the idea that signs are not arbitrary, here with Enzo, not only is there an acknowledgement that the interpretation of signs is diverse but that diversity is part of process through which qualia are experienced. The varying interpretation of qualisigns has not attracted the attention within anthropology that it deserves. In Munn’s *The Fame of Gawa* (1992), the collective interpretation of qualic experience is not only uniformly shared within Massim society, but the study itself was focused largely on that qualisign, fame, which promoted the society’s inter-island wellbeing. Similarly, Harkness points to “cultural convention and institutionalized practice” (2013, 15) as the mechanisms through which sensuous, individualized experiences can become shared qualisigns. Laurence Ralph’s (2013) analysis of the qualia of pain suffered by African Americans at the hands of the Chicago Police Department certainly points to a deeply divided society, but not in a way where the qualisigns ascribed to by one section of that society are influenced by the qualic experience or qualisigns of another. Likewise, Kockelman (2016) begins from a point of difference with regard to the semiotic interpretations of eco-tourists and Guatemalan villagers, but asks how such difference might be parsed as sameness. The way in which political meaning is created in dialogue, however, is exactly what Lazar’s (2015) intervention regarding the crowd’s audience prompts analysts to consider.

ontological commitments. Here, the recognition of social indicators as indexing a social identity distinct from one’s own is a result of understanding the division which is seen in Argentine society as a natural given. For a discussion of qualities serving as indexes of social types, see Gal and Irvine (2019) on German dialects in Hungary.

⁴¹ Throughout I use Gal and Irvine’s term “conjecture” in place of Pierce’s “interpretant”

Following Lazar's prompt, I have shown that the way in which qualisigns are differently interpreted should be central to a symbolic analysis of protest.

To appreciate the crowd as qualisign for Peronist marchers, then, we need to look at it existing always in relations of dialogue. Breaking down this process there are two key factors to understand. 1) Here the individual's qualic experience of an event entailed being cognisant of, and was informed by, the qualia of the same event as experienced by members of a group of which the individual is not a part. And 2) that this qualic experience is conventionalised and is made to stand for something (a qualisign, here the value of popular sovereignty) which supersedes the experience in which the quale takes place. Enzo's pleasure at the elderly pair's discomfort is an instance of the qualic experience of marching as a crowd being informed by the qualia (fear of disorder) prompted in the crowd's other. For Enzo and the Peronists, their own qualic satisfaction was iconic of an emergent popular sovereignty, a value that was being signified not only through the common sensuous experience but also through a shared political cosmovision in which legitimate political authority lay with "the people" and had traditionally been usurped by "the oligarchy."

Moreover, the Peronist marchers were attempting to realise this popular sovereignty through their presence in Córdoba's city centre. The behaviour of Nicolás, Enzo and their fellow marchers had effects beyond the semiotic; it also acted as an unruly and assertive demand about their access to public space. The plazas of Latin American cities have been important sites of political history making. Working in Venezuela, Ana Servigna (2015) tracks how supporters of Hugo Chávez worked to increase the moral authority of their political project by associating it with the independence movement of Simón Bolívar. Rank and file supporters worked to achieve this association through the control of public plazas; Chavista demonstrations were held in these spaces, but anti-Chavista bodies were forcibly excluded by pro-government volunteers. The Venezuelan theorist of urban planning, Clara Irazábal suggests understanding public spaces as central to struggles over citizenship and democracy throughout Latin America (2008). Irazábal argues that this is especially the case for Latin America's poor, who, in an era of neoliberal governance that links citizenship rights with consumerist capabilities, have taken to plazas across the region to protest against their growing exclusion (2008; cf. Low 2000). By tracing a route through Córdoba's historic centre – the site of banks, the plaza, the old seat of government – marginal Cordobés contested this exclusion. The fact that following the manifestación they relied upon me, a foreigner, to guide them through the city centre speaks to the spatial elements of this exclusion. In this context the threatening behaviour of Nicolás and Enzo against the crowd's others should be

understood as an exertion of the principle of popular sovereignty: a claim by the men that majoritarianism, rather than wealth and racial privilege, would determine access to space.

Asserting their collective presence in the city centre, the aggrupation of Peronist bodies was semiotically loaded. In a study of secular populism in Turkey, Kabir Tambar suggests that “the crowd itself functioned as a metadiscursive sign of populism” (2009, 532). This sign relation could be agreed upon by both Peronists and anti-Peronists in the Argentine context. What was debated – and defined through dialogue – between the parties was the sign that should be extrapolated from the quality of bodies amassed in urban streets: a disorderly and disordering scene, or a public manifestation of popular sovereignty.

Conclusion

So, for its critics, populism is overly embodied. It entails the “white heat” of emotion, intensifying as it radiates in that affective space between the bodies of the crowd. Alternatively, a hypnotic relationship exists between leader and led. Citizens are not gathered together to show their collective assessment of political issues, rather they are in the thrall of a demagogue-cum-mystic. As a result, the crowds’ express desires are not properly said political. For radical critics of populism, the assembled crowd lacks the analytic skills to understand the political agenda that would lead to their liberation. For liberal critics, the crowd is always already disqualified from the political sphere for failing to conform to the disembodied “reading public” imagined by neoclassical political theory. In Argentina, as I have discussed in this chapter, liberal anti-popular sentiments are supercharged as they confront the possibility of a challenge to the class and racial hierarchies upon which Argentine society has been constructed.

At the same time, however, critics label populism as too ephemeral. As I explored in the previous chapter, it is, for critics, nothing but discourse. In contrast to the supposedly more developed ideologies, populism is powered by empty promises.

Too embodied and too ephemeral. These dual criticisms constitute a liberal double-bind from which it is impossible for the embodied publics of populism to escape and have the claims they are expressing taken seriously. Despite their seemingly contradictory nature these criticisms are two sides of the same coin, as norms of political participation developed by Enlightenment era European upper-middle class are reapplied to forestall political projects that would challenge the individualism and property rights of an upper-middle class which conceives of itself as European.

By considering the way in which the idea of “rhetoric” has been constructed as divergent from norms of communication, we can see where these two criticisms are conjoined. Again, I find the post-liberal philosophy of Iris Marion Young useful in thinking through this bind. For Young, rhetoric is “the various ways something can be said, which colour and constrain its substantive content” (2000, 65) and entails, a “situated, figured, and affective appeal” (2000, 69). Within the terms of the argument I have been laying out in this chapter and the last, rhetoric is a purely discursive political appeal to emotion which makes itself felt in the bodies of its audience. It is both the particularism of the rhetorical appeal, and its emotional component that Young identifies as running foul of an influential strain of western philosophy, which sees a universalistic rational discourse, removed from individual or group interests and desires, as being the only stable ground for deliberative democracy. Such an “ideal of disembodied and disembedded reason” (2000, 63) is of course impossible. All speech is situated, and even the most deliberately staid of performances involves an appeal to its audience’s emotional assessment.

Young suggests, then, that the rejection of “rhetoric” is a form of what she calls “internal exclusion” from democratic participation. Where external exclusion is, for Young, the processes through which people are denied access to the forum of discussion and decision making, internal exclusion relates to the means by which people who are able to access these forums are denied the possibility to influence them (2000). Internal exclusion manifests here through norms of articulation and norms of dispassionateness to devalue political claims as seeming too emotional or embodied. If one considers this dynamic demographically, these norms function to disproportionately exclude lower class individuals as well as people of colour whose linguistic norms and forms of political expression do not meet rigid, Eurocentric and classist standards. In a recent work, the political anthropologist Sandhya Fuchs (2020) explores exactly these dynamics. Working in India, Fuchs demonstrates that “the relationship between legal aesthetics, verbal registers, and the embodied nature of structural marginality” (2020, 178) was, ironically, responsible for the inability of marginalised Indians to access anti-discrimination measures. Young argues that: “the only remedy for the dismissiveness with which some political expressions are treated on the grounds that they are too dramatic, emotional, or figurative is to notice that any discursive content and argument is embodied in situated style and rhetoric” (2000, 64).⁴²

⁴² In the conclusion to this this I take up a discussion of the politics of noticing, thinking through how such acts of attention giving can serve as the basis for a just, democratic environmental politics.

The reflexive impulse of Young's argument should, I suggest, be an important element for anthropologists to bear in mind as we study populism. This should prompt both the recognition of hegemonic western forms of political discourse as equally situated, and as a result, we should refuse to dismiss forms of political action that do not resemble those we are familiar with as somehow illegitimate or as indicating that political analysis is not being undertaken by those participating in such action. For anthropologists, especially those of us concerned with inclusive political projects, this means reassessing our normative and even ontological understandings of what the political is. This does not by any means require that we share the Peronists' interpretation of their crowds as qualisigns of popular sovereignty, or agree with populists more generally that presence in the street signifies the direct, unmediated will of the people. It does, however, mean that we should dismiss out of hand the suggestion that such presence is in and of itself illegitimate, and that we understand the disorder liberals see such crowds as signifying as the exclusionary ploy it is.

Chapter Five

Pyrrhic Nationals

Introduction

Beside the chicken-coop at Huerta Maipú, Luis was telling me about his relationship with his father and brothers. One of seven sons, Luis proudly stated “We are all *trabajadores*”. This had not always been the case. There had been a period of two and a half years in which Luis had been out of work. While unemployed, Luis recounted, his father would mock him, and Luis felt deeply embarrassed. “That was what he wanted though,” Luis explained, suggesting that his father had intended that he feel ashamed, as unemployment was a shameful state. Although Luis currently conceived of himself as a “trabajador” he was uncomfortable with the fact that he received a government benefit, and told me his goal was that Huerta Maipú be self-subsistent, allowing wages to be paid without state support. As uncomfortable as Luis was in his status as beneficiary of a *plan social*, he was eager to contrast his vigorous labour with the activities of other welfare recipients, who he claimed received funds simply to sit around and occasionally attend political marches.

The work to which Luis referred was his farm labour at Huerta Maipú, and the plan social he so resented receiving was the Salario Social Complementario (SSC, Complementary Social Salary), a workfare program funded through the federal Ministry of Social Development. In Argentina, where in 2018 9.9 percent of adults were unemployed and 49.3 percent of workers lacked formal employment (Donza et. al. 2019), agroecology is touted as a means to generate job opportunities. As I have discussed elsewhere in this thesis, the incomes generated through participating in agroecological farming were primarily financed by the SSC.

In this chapter I examine the SSC in greater depth, and in doing so, treat it as an entry point to challenge dominant understandings of the relationship between the nation-state and masculinity. In particular, I explore how masculinity can impede the realisation of the substantive benefits of national inclusion. Investigating this dynamic will offer a detailed understanding of the substantive meaning of citizenship, which has been shaped by alternations of populist and neoliberal government, and the role that Argentine citizens have played in shaping this meaning. My argument builds upon a somewhat subordinated approach to understanding masculinity which I put into conversation with anthropological analyses of the role of civil society in neoliberal regimes. I develop the concept of the “pyrrhic national” to understand this dynamic, and in doing so I take inspiration from Lauren Berlant’s (2011) *Cruel Optimism*. For Berlant, cruel optimism occurs when “the object that draws your

attachment actively impedes the aim that brought you to it initially” (2011, 1). I also follow Farha Ghannam (2013) in viewing masculinity as not performed, but rather materialised. This approach sees masculinity as the outcome of a process of “struggles, challenges, and physical and emotional pressures” (2013, 32). Rather than see a deliberate or fake “performance,” an analytic of materialisation indicates the deeply internalised, embodied, and coercive operation of masculinity. Pyrrhic nationals, then, are those subjects who, drawn by the prospect of national inclusion, help to render impossible the realization of “the good life” (Berlant 2011, 2) normatively associated with national belonging. This may include subjects whose struggles to conform to national ideals inadvertently undermine the substantive benefits associated with state-citizenship. In the case of Huerta Maipú, there is a distinctly gendered element to this pyrrhic act, as it is through Maipuense men’s struggles to materialise a masculinity in line with national dictates that they constitute themselves as the exact subjects needed by neoliberal projects. These projects are ultimately harmful to peri-urban Cordobés, as they see expansive networks of state-support replaced by ad hoc grants to an inconsistent patchwork of community groups.

As I came to realise over the course of my fieldwork, farming at Huerta Maipú entailed a dynamic of pyrrhic nationalism. In order to explain this claim, I begin by discussing the literature on the relationship between masculinity and the nation, and bringing into that conversation anthropological analyses of neoliberalism. I have written elsewhere in this thesis about the way in which members of the agroecological collective bear little resemblance to historically constructed ideals of the national citizenry. In this chapter I explore this more fully than I have been able to elsewhere, and discuss the stigma attached to the perceived failings of these farmworkers to conform to national ideals. Rather than challenge the basis for this stigma, the members of Huerta Maipú sought to re-frame themselves in line with historical ideals, in particular with the affective figure of the *trabajador* as ideal citizen. These men – and the workers of Huerta Maipú were almost exclusively men – materialised two alternative forms of locally valorised masculinity in order to more closely approximate the ideal they believed they should achieve: the *trabajador* and a respectable, domestically oriented masculinity. The successful materialisations of these masculine archetypes, however, were the moments in which my interlocutors’ nationalism became pyrrhic. After discussing the ways in which men aligned themselves with national ideals of masculine citizenship, I explore how such materialisations are co-opted by the state. Necessities which in an earlier era would have been guaranteed by an expansive state were administered through workfare, and ultimately became the responsibility of marginal citizens or community groups. The hidden costs associated with this model of community self-

sustenance are shown in their barest and most violent form at the end of this chapter, as I discuss these same men being enlisted to organize a community drug rehabilitation centre. Here, the neoliberal logic of responsabilisation sees the management of a public health crisis devolved to untrained, and underfunded, community members: a stark reversal of the expansive health policies of earlier Argentine governments

Until this point, my thesis has been squarely focused on my informants' support for populist politics, so an examination of a neoliberal workfare program may seem to be a departure. The SSC however, has antecedents in Peronist governments, and the social infrastructure through which it functioned largely existed as a result of Kirchnerism's horizontal turn. By pointing to the place of left-wing populism in establishing the SSC I do not wish to diminish the degree to which the SSC exists as a neoliberal form of workfare that enables right-wing cuts to state services. By acknowledging both the populist and neoliberal influences, in this chapter I move from discussing my interlocutors' desire for a return to populist governance and describe the world that rotations of populist and neoliberal governance has begotten. To paraphrase Berlant, the pursuit of supposedly inclusionary politics, just like that of ostensibly privileged identities, can be the source of hope that ultimately inhibits flourishing.

Masculinities and the nation

Reading men's attempts at national belonging as pyrrhic runs contrary to much of the literature examining the relationship between masculinity and the nation-state, particularly with regard to Argentina. Studies of masculinity in Argentina largely naturalise the link between masculinity and power. Many authors discuss the place of masculinity in high-prestige social settings – Badaró (2014) in the military, Mendoza (2018) with Patagonian Park Rangers, and Fuentes and Guinness (2019) with elite rugby clubs. Moving from socially privileged to subaltern men, while maintaining the link between masculinity and power, Whitson (2010) examines gender norms among informal workers following the millennial economic crisis in Argentina. Whitson shows that while economic insecurity has prevented working class men from performing the role of "provider", these men began challenging the hegemony of this role through a discourse that equated masculinity with ideals which characterized informal labour: autonomy, independence, and mobility (2010, 171). These same ideals were promoted, Archetti (1999) argues, by dominant masculine archetypes that sit outside Argentine norms of morality. Archetti claims that the figures of the soccer star, the tango musician, and the polo player offer alternative scripts for performing hegemonic masculinity in Argentina, due to their national significance.

Beyond Argentina, the nation and nationalism retain a privileged place within masculinities literature. A dominant approach within social sciences understands nationalist action as a means to “achieve” masculinity (Munn 2008; Tengan 2008). Elliston (2004), for instance, argues that nationalist action among young men in French Polynesia should be understood as a response to sociological crisis. Following the region’s incorporation into, and subsequent abandon by, global labor markets, traditional masculine identities are no longer attainable and young men have turned to nationalist action as an alternative means “through which moral masculinity can be achieved” (Elliston 2004, 618). This notion of achieving masculinity through nationalism is regularly framed within Connell’s (2005) heuristic of “hegemonic masculinity”. While Connell’s work helped popularise the multiplicity of masculinities, all too often this multiplicity is read as a state of competition, with masculinities placed in a Bourdieusian field of power vying for hegemonic status. This competitiveness is present in works such as those of du Pisani (2004) and Banerjee (2018) who study histories of Afrikaner and Indian men, respectively, engaged in national struggle. Competition between multiple masculinities sits at odds with the inherently normalising imperative of nationalism – the imagined commonality of character and interests upon which nationalism is based (Anderson 2006).

An alternative approach reverses this directionality. The nation becomes the more gravitational of the two phenomena, itself provoking forms of masculinity rather than being solely a means through which masculinity can be enacted (Gill 1997; Bear 2015). Rather than the “gender politics” discussed by Connell (2005, 37), where “politics” refers to the relations of power deployed and contested within masculinity as a competitive field, this alternative reading views masculinity as constitutive of and constituted by a more macro-level political power. Gender is more an effect of power than a means to individually claim it. For instance, in telling contrast to du Pisani and Banerjee, when Tom Boellstorff (2004) discusses intra-national violence committed by sexually normative men against sexually non-normative men in Indonesia, it is the nation that the former group perceives as threatened and in need of defence, not men’s personal privileged access to it. Adopting this approach does not mean surrendering the recognition that masculinities are multiple, but sees such multiplicity as an outcome of varied, often contradictory dictates (Forth 2008; Halberstam 1998; Ghannam 2013). A conceptualization of masculinity as an achievement occludes the potential costs associated with materializing masculinity. By contrast, understanding the normative commitments demanded of men by the nation opens space for exploring the pyrrhic elements of masculinity.

I bring this latter approach into conversation with a growing body of anthropological literature examining the means through which civil organisations are co-opted by the state to ameliorate the effects of its retreat. Ethnographic studies have shown how civil groups such as charitable organisations (Paley 2001; Muehlebach 2011), worker-cooperatives and labour unions (Shever 2012; McNamara 2021), and vigilante groups (Goldstein 2005) may mediate, but ultimately enable, neoliberal cuts to state services.

Gender formations are active components in the restructuring of the relationship between state and civil society. In Paraguay, Caroline Schuster (2015) centres gender in implicating civil organizations in the state's withdrawal. She demonstrates that the self-same micro-credit agencies that promote women's empowerment as a pathway out of poverty are caught-up in producing both women's gendered subjectivity, and the conditions of possibility for neoliberal impoverishment. Nancy Fraser (2009) argues that the emancipatory language of second-wave feminism writ large has been pressed into the service of neoliberalism and against state presence in the market.

The same feminist critiques of welfare states' androcentrism that Fraser identifies, have left social science with a presumption that the relationship between the nation/nationalism and masculine subjects is *a priori* one of privilege. Theorists such as Brown (1992), Enloe (2014), and Nagel (2005) have described nationalism and the nation-state as fundamentally masculine phenomena. Parallel to this literature, Yuval-Davis (1997) suggests that nationalist discourses and state institutions discipline women into a subordinate role of biological and cultural reproducer of the nation. In Pakistan, Khoja-Moolji (2018) tracks how the "Ideal Educated Girl" has served as a subject through which competing visions of the nation could be articulated since the colonial era. Through discourses of gender and education the feminine subject has been repeatedly made to shoulder the hopes of realising an imagined Pakistani future. The naturalisation of the relationship between men and national privilege, however, has left the ways in which masculinity is enlisted in neoliberal restructurings, and how such projects are ultimately harmful to the men involved, comparatively under-theorized.

Beyond ideal nationals

Far from having a privileged relationship to the nation, the men of Huerta Maipú were extremely marginal to narrow ideals of Argentine national belonging. More specifically, Maipuense men failed to meet national expectations of whiteness and workforce participation.

I have discussed the myth of Argentina as a European outpost surrounded by Latin American countries at various points throughout this thesis, and have noted the stigma attached to people who do not conform to national ideals of whiteness. As I have stated, the conception of whiteness that dominates Argentine society is based as much upon economic activity as it is on biology. It is also based upon geography, as certain regions of the country, and distinct parts of cities, are mapped out as being less white than others. The poverty and peri-urban geographic marginality of Maipú marks it as one such non-white locale in the minds of many middle-class Argentines.

This association is deeply stigmatising for the people of barrios like Maipú. Mario, who is white skinned and blue eyed, explained that despite his colouring he could be called “negro” due to his poverty and residence in Maipú. The wide-spread belief in productive white Argentines as opposed to welfare dependent dark-skinned ones is reinforced by state media. Figure 11. (@juanibalasini 2019) is a screenshot of a graphic produced by the Argentine Ministry of Production, aimed at communicating the supposedly small number of taxpayers who fund the welfare system. It was criticised on social media for depicting the employed taxpayers as entirely white, and welfare recipients as dark-skinned. Such understandings of race are common in Argentina, however, with dark-skinned and Indigenous Argentines commonly represented as welfare dependent.



Figure 11: A racialised understanding of the Argentine welfare system. Credit: twitter @juanibalasini

Such thinking leaves poor, dark-skinned Argentines outside the parameters of the imagined national community. Dark-skinned Argentines are imagined by their lighter skinned counterparts to be delinquents; strangers (or even foreigners) to an idealised white, industrious, urban Argentina (Guano 2003).⁴³ Although my interlocutors critiqued such racist ideas, they simultaneously recognised themselves through these same exclusionary discourses. For instance, Nicolás would incisively speak about the discrimination that dark-skinned Argentines such as himself faced. He would also, however, attribute his dark complexion to a southern Italian heritage. Stating: “*venían en barcos, mi abuelo venió acá en un barco*” (They [my family] came on boats, my grandfather came here on a boat), Nicolás repeated the well-worn trope of European descent as foundational to the Argentine identity, a trope that has been central to the exclusion of non-white Argentines (Garguin 2007; Briones 2002).

Workers at Huerta Maipú attempted to challenge the idea that they were welfare dependent, as we have seen with Luis. Luis did not challenge, however, the notion that underpinned the stigma he wished to avoid: that receiving welfare was in itself shameful. Similarly, when Ramón, a founder of Huerta Maipú, was helping Enrique, a farmworker in his mid-forties, to fill out forms regarding his daughter’s schooling, his suggestion that they reply “unemployed” to the prompt of Enrique’s profession was met with indignation. The irritation Enrique expressed with “Why would you put unemployed?”, was only slightly lessened when Ramón explained that it might result in some further state payment. The SSC was paid to subjects without formal employment, but was only one of the income streams, albeit the steadiest, that the workers at Huerta Maipú received. The majority of my interlocutors regularly undertook *changas* (intermittent manual labour), ranging from ad hoc construction jobs to subcontracting for the municipality to clear overgrown public areas.

The men with whom I worked were cognisant of the ways in which they did not conform to Argentine national ideals. They were largely dark-skinned, and this divergence from the Argentine ideal of whiteness was exacerbated by their marginal place in the workforce. As with the informal street salespeople of Buenos Aires with whom Mariano Perelman (2013) worked, the workers of Huerta Maipú undertook “rituals” to cast themselves as “deserving of assistance” (2013, 244). Like Perelman’s interlocutors, the workers of Huerta Maipú took pains to minimize the distance between national ideals and their own realities. Unlike

⁴³ See also the *Universidad Nacional de Córdoba’s Museo de Antropología* exhibition ‘*Negro sobre blanco, 200 años de racismo*’, curated by the Cordobés photography collective *Colectivo Manifiesto* which demonstrates the continued presence of racist and exclusionary attitudes in contemporary Argentina

Perelman's informants, however, whose rituals for inclusion were direct and inter-personal, the workers of Huerta Maipú were attempting to position themselves as legitimate in the eyes of a more ephemeral imagined community.

Affective citizenship

Luis' desire to position himself as a trabajador was one such claim to legitimacy, and was motivated by the valence of this figure in Argentine conceptions of national belonging and citizenship, established primarily by the first Peronist regime (1946-1955). Marcos Mendoza suggests that Argentines live under a regime of "labor-based citizenship" (2017, 57). While political-economic developments since the time of Perón have made the subject of the full-time unionised worker, upon which the trabajador was originally based, an unviable prospect for many, labour remains the dominant motif through which Argentines imagine their place within the nation. As Perelman shows this remains the case even for informal workers (2013).

It is not that Peronism represented the first attempt to marry legal citizenship with a national consciousness, but rather that it was the most thorough and successful in its attempt. In the 1870s, President Domingo Sarmiento expanded the state's education system in an attempt to cultivate liberal sensibilities among what he saw as a largely backward citizenry (Garguin 2017). The education system was likewise the vehicle through which the cultural nationalist Ricardo Rojas sought to assimilate migrants and the children of migrants into a narrow Hispanicist, Catholic model of Argentine citizenship, as laid out in his 1909 work *La Restauración Nacionalista* (Rock 1987). As I discuss in chapter one of this thesis, the Rosarino politician, Ricardo Caballero, pre-figured the Peronist project by linking working-class culture with popular nationalist symbols and gendered notions of labour to posit (male) workers as the most truly authentic Argentines (Karush 1999).

While historical and ethnographic studies have demonstrated that affective regimes of national belonging are often central to the functioning of citizenship, these studies are equally clear that such linkages are the outcomes of determined projects by states (Stoler 2008; Shoshan 2014; Kalm 2019). In Perón's "New Argentina" this entailed a reimagining of the rights attached to citizenship, an outreach to previously marginalised Argentines, and declarations of national and economic sovereignty demonstrated through the nationalisation of industries. The trabajador offered a conceptual identity broad enough to integrate an ethnically and class diverse population into unified national identity, while unions, as representatives of actual workers, were simultaneously incorporated into the infrastructure

through which social rights were guaranteed (James 1988; Elena 2011). Of this era, Daniel James writes: “Citizenship was not to be defined any longer simply in terms of individual rights and relations within political society, but now redefined in terms of the economic and social realm of civil society” (1988, 16). Eduardo Elena (2011) has cautioned that understanding the regime of national citizenship ushered in by Peronism should not be limited to its pro-worker industrial relations policies, or even the growing role of the state in guaranteeing welfare. Instead, Elena foregrounds the expansion of market consumption and the generally improved living standards among the Argentine working-population as central to the Peronist project of social citizenship. The Peronist state drew upon contemporary social scientific thought to transform citizenship from a largely formalistic legal category to create a more fully affective concept of national belonging entailing ideas of popular participation and rising living standards, in which the *trabajador* was protagonist.

For Berlant, the *trabajador* exists at the centre of that “moral-intimate-economic thing called ‘the good life’” (2011, 2). It is a historically pieced together assemblage of legal rights, normative ideas of economic mobility, moral claims to national belonging, and gender ideals. Through the figure of the *trabajador* early Peronists imbued citizenship with an affectively dense conceptualisation of national belonging.

Trabajadores on the farm

Outside the national ideal because of their racial and economic positioning, my interlocutors turned to masculinity to attain inclusion. The agroecological farm at Maipú provided both an arena in which, and the material substrate through which, marginalised men could materialise masculinity. This entailed, on the one hand, a vigorous engagement with the material things that populated the farm, and, on the other hand, a tender, caring, disposition from the very same men, both of which I examine here and in the next section.

At an open day at Huerta Maipú the workers demonstrated how to prepare bio-organic fertiliser. They layered the dry ingredients – soil, leaves, manure, ground wheat husks, charcoal, and crushed rock powder – and tossed a mixture of water, molasses, and yeast between each layer. Men took turns forcefully shovelling the pile. They joked about “*las chicas*” (the girls) getting involved. Circe, a student attending the workshop, obliged. She took a shovel and started turning the mixture. This elicited excitement and laughter from the male onlookers. She soon handed back the shovel; none of the other women came forward to replace her. Instead, Javier, a young, semi-regular worker at the farm, took the shovel and lanced the mixture. Deciding it needed to be broken up he found a machete and started to

hack rabidly at the pile. Clumps of manure, mud, and hay splashed up against his shins. A younger worker stood back to avoid injury.

A physicality and ability to overcome nature were central to the particular masculinity the agroecologists materialised. Throughout my tenure at the farm, men's rough manipulation of agroecological materials was constant. Weeds were cleared with powerful blows. Logs and concrete bollards were used to smash vegetable matter to make bio-organic pesticides – a physically exhausting task that invited an audience of onlookers, prompting commentary on who could last the longest and a noting of the strengths or faults of the individual's bodily technique. Deliberate exertions onto space were not always so instrumental. Often my informants would reshape their spaces with seemingly no purpose at all: hacking at branches, digging machetes into tabletops, lobbing soil at other men.

The exuberance of such physical activity helped to justify the exclusion of women from this space, but also confirmed the workers' masculinity. Gender theorists writing against the discursive turn have long noted that while gender is socially constructed it is experienced and expressed principally in and through bodies (Farquhar 1991; Young 2005). Connell (2005) describes a general masculine imperative of demonstrating agentive capacity through exerting one's presence on the world. While I am hesitant to suggest such cross-cultural universals of masculinity, ethnographies from France to Tanzania to Turkey to Egypt highlight local categories of masculinity as entailing spatial regimes of bodily extension (Thorkelson 2020; Weiss 1997; Açıksöz 2012; Ghannam 2013). In the Argentine case, this agentive capacity relates to reshaping nature, which has long been constructed as a rival – almost agentive in its own right – in man's project of settling Argentina.⁴⁴

Huerta Maipú also offered a spatial arena in which masculine identity could be claimed. Palermo (2016), working in Comodoro Rivadavia, in Argentine Patagonia, shows how space is gendered by oil workers. These men construct their worksites as explicitly masculine. By contrast, the world of Comodoro Rivadavia outside the oil fields is feminised space – and all those who inhabit it are likewise feminised. Leslie Salzinger demonstrates that gender is not only an input to labour but is actively produced by labour practices (2003). Unlike the femininity insipidly provoked in the Mexican factories of Salzinger's ethnography, here masculinity was deliberately sought after by workers themselves as an outcome of labour practices. The ability to appropriately materialise masculinity offered Maipuenses a means to

⁴⁴ As with many settler colonies the Argentine state and Argentine society has had a long standing concern with establishing dominance over an unruly "nature." I point to this concern especially with Argentine statesmen from the mid to late nineteenth century in chapter one (cf. Navarro Floria 1999; Novoa 2007; Gordillo 2014), but a dominance over environmental spaces formed part of Peronist imagery as well (Milanesio 2013)

claim the identity of *trabajador*, despite even the most steadily employed of the men working only informal and irregular jobs. To return again to my conversation with Luis, it was through manual labour that he sought to establish himself as a *trabajador* and differentiate himself from supposedly unproductive welfare recipients. Such appeals to manual labour were commonplace among the farm workers, and the intensity of this labour served as an always ready retort to potential accusations that these welfare recipients were lazy or unproductive.

Beyond rebutting suggestions that they were unproductive, my interlocutors used labour as a motif in their moral claims to inclusion. Olivia Angé describes the Argentine moral economy as “haunted by two despised figures ... the idle poor and the idle rich. The thief (*ladrón*) and the lazybones (*vago*) both avoid work, either by making a comfortable livelihood out of corrupted forms of exploitation or by eking out a miserable one through state allowances” (2021, 83). During a discussion of the unfair distribution of wealth in Argentina, Nahuel, an older member of the collective and father to thirteen children, interjected, responding to his friend’s claim that some Argentines owned hundreds of properties, to note how the concentration of land affected his family life. “There’s overflowing land in Maipú, and I can’t make myself a plot of land” (*Hay tierra que sobra en Maipú, y yo no puedo hacerme una tierra*). Here, Nahuel articulated his exclusion through moral claims regarding labour and productivity. The idea of an over-abundance of land – “tierra que sobra” – spoke to the way in which wealth concentration left land unproductive. By contrast, to the excess, unproductive land of the wealthy, Nahuel simply wanted to own a home. Nahuel’s use of *tierra* (land/earth), rather than simply saying he wanted to build himself a home, reinforced the idea that this was land he was developing. Again, by using the phrase “yo no puedo hacerme una tierra,” a sense of active labour was implied in this development. *Hacer* is the verb to make/do. Nahuel was making a moral claim to property, rejecting any idea that he might be a *vago*, and instead suggesting that it was the rich whose behaviour was unproductive.

Domestically oriented workers

The moral logics involved in Nahuel’s critique of his own exclusion extend beyond the motif of labour; present too, are moral claims about domestic life. In this section I will explore the way in which care for plants and domestic provisioning similarly helped the men of Huerta Maipú to materialise an idealised masculinity.

In contrast to the forceful engagements with agroecological matter that I have detailed up until this point, I was regularly struck by the tender attention the men of Huerta Maipú paid to

plants and soils.⁴⁵ One afternoon I joined Enrique and Luis to harvest parsley for a customer. Enrique cut a bunch, placed it in a plastic bag, and gave it to Luis. Luis opened the bag of parsley, brought his face down to the opening and inhaled deeply. “What a great smell!” he exclaimed. He made me do the same, asking me to affirm how nice the freshly cut herb smelled, before he repeated his inhalation. After gathering enough parsley for the customer, Luis harvested chard. His arms full of the dark green leaves, I asked him what he planned to do with them, to which he replied he would take them home and prepare *torrejas de acelga* for his family.

It is notable that Luis did not only gather the best produce to feed his family, but that he would be the one who prepared their meal. The domestic featured heavily in discussions of labour at the farm. When I asked a younger man why he had suggested that the elder farmers were the best workers, he replied, “They’re older, they have families to maintain, for them they have to work. They can’t be like us... we don’t have anyone to maintain.” It was to their families, the workers said, that most vegetables grown were destined. Enactments of care – for plants, for oneself, and for one’s family – formed part of the repertoire by which workers at Huerta Maipú sought to contest the stigma they felt. Inés Pérez (2015) argues that an orientation towards the domestic has been a long-standing means by which working-class Argentine men have historically attempted to demonstrate social respectability. A focus on the home enabled men to both materially approximate middle-class lifestyles, and to communicate a commitment to middle-class moralities of “family togetherness.”

Relations of care were established that exceeded the domestic unit. The farmers at Huerta Maipú practised care for plants by recognising their vital materiality, and ensuring the ideal conditions were met for their flourishing. Huerta Maipú planted crops in line with the biodynamic calendar, which dictates planting times for different types of crops – specified to hours of the day. Due to a period of intermittent spring rain, we had missed a number of consecutive opportunities to plant tomato seedlings within the window allowed by the calendar. The seedlings were over a month and a half old, and were severely outgrowing their nursery. Transplanting them safely had become a two person job. While Ramón dug precisely at the seedlings’ bases, he asked me to remove them from the soil and carry them

⁴⁵ The embodied relationships which my interlocutors maintained with agroecological material somewhat challenges the neat lines drawn by Tsing (2012) in her contrast of the violence of plantation agriculture with more tender human-plant engagements. That the men of Huerta Maipú were both violent and loving with agroecological plants speaks more to the contradictions involved in materializing masculinity than to a straight forward set of relations fostered by a mode of production. While I certainly do not consider this agroecological matter inert, or diminish the influence it had on men’s behaviour, I think a more nuanced approach than Tsing’s is to look to the various and nuanced forms of relationality which exist when plants and humans become entangled in one another’s lives (cf. Besky 2019).

to pre-prepared holes. Throughout the process Ramón repeatedly emphasised that I was to take special care with the exposed roots. Despite the delay in their planting, Ramón explained to me that following the calendar would still be what was best for the plants, stating that planting them on that particular day meant that the seedlings would develop fewer leaves, but more body and more fruit, as the fluids of the plant's meristem – or what he elsewhere referred to as the plants' "vital energies" – would be drawn upwards by the moon and other celestial bodies.

Practising care – for family, for plants, and for their own bodies – helped to frame marginalised men's masculinity as respectable. Marcia Inhorn (2012) suggests that studies of masculinity need to be more attentive to the ways in which care can emerge as a masculine value, criticising Connell for the lack of attention her work pays to care. As noted by Wentzell (2015), and Hurtado and Sinha (2016), highlighting alternative gendered materialisations is doubly important in studying Latino masculinities, as it helps to challenge a monolithic and politically problematic representation of Latino masculinity as machismo. Through agroecological practice, Argentine men materialised care, taking responsibility for their own health, and the health of their families. Agroecologically produced vegetables were not only free of potentially harmful agro-chemicals, but were supposedly also the richest possible produce in terms of vitamins and minerals. The smell and flavour of the produce which Luis and Enrique so excitedly described and asked me to affirm were reflections of the health of the plants themselves, as well as their health-giving properties. The domestic care – socially and materially embodied in agroecological foods – helped the socially stigmatised men of Huerta Maipú bring their masculinity more in line with a male archetype understood within Argentina as respectable.

Learning ecological self-sufficiency

While they worked at Huerta Maipú my interlocutors learned what they viewed as valuable skills. These skills at once derived their value from the political-economic context of neoliberal reform in which the men learned them, but, I argue, they simultaneously enabled anti-poor policies to successfully be implemented. Here and in the next section I discuss the development of neoliberalism and workfare policies in Argentina, and in doing so, show the pyrrhic nature of the nationalist masculinities I have been discussing. Even though Huerta Maipú was explicitly constructed as an anti-market, anti-capitalist and anti-patriarchal site, materialising masculinities through social and community activism entailed the Maipuenses becoming the exact subjects required by neoliberal projects.

Argentina served as an early testing ground for neoliberalism. Protectionist policies and pro-worker reforms of the 1930s to the 1950s resulted in a powerful union movement. The military junta (1976–1983) viewed the unions as a potential source of resistance to its regime. Through neoliberal reforms the dictatorship at once sought to re-establish traditional class and racial hierarchies and also weaken union power – opening the economy diminished the importance of Argentine heavy industry, in particular, and promoted the precarisation of labour while at the same time the state commitment to full-employment was abandoned (Perelman 2013; Grimson and Kessler 2005; Undurraga 2015). Pro-market reforms were deepened during democracy under Carlos Menem (1989–1999). De-industrialisation likewise further progressed as the Argentine economy was geared towards agricultural exports, soy most important among them (Undurraga 2015). Menem’s government adopted CCTs to ameliorate the extreme poverty caused by broad cuts to services, and in 1996 *Plan Trabajar* became Argentina’s first workfare program (Fenwick 2016).

In 2003 Néstor Kirchner came to power, explicitly contrasting his vision of the state with that of Menem, and although the state was more interventionist under Kirchnerism, the break with Menemism was far from complete. Economically disciplined by a desire to control inflation, the Kirchners were more fiscally conservative than most of the leftist governments that took power throughout Latin America in the early 2000s (Wylde 2014; Kaese and Wolff 2016). As with Menem, the Kirchner governments relied upon CCTs, albeit ones based upon ideas of human capital, rather than neoliberal workfare (Fenwick 2016, 135). Further, it is worth noting just how important CCTs were to the Kirchnerist project. Fenwick demonstrates that the political manipulation of labour-based workfare programs by the then Kirchner-ally, Eduardo Duhalde, was central to securing the presidency for Néstor in 2003 (2016).

The dynamic I am drawing out in this chapter – in which men’s participation in workfare programs ultimately enabled reforms that hollowed out state services – is attributable not only to Menemist and Macrista neoliberalism, but also has its roots in Kirchnerism. Both through machinations to attain power, and through the horizontalist turn that encouraged mass participation in organisations such as Huerta Maipú, Kirchnerism set the conditions of possibility for the neoliberal state to co-opt the labour of community organisations to buttress the state’s withdrawal.

The payments my interlocutors received existed within this two-decade long tradition of CCT usage for the alleviation of extreme poverty. The SSC required recipients to work sixteen hours per week on an approved community project – such as the farm at Huerta Maipú. In an

impoverished community the farming project was understood to be valuable as a cost-saving measure. It provided food for workers and – in cooperation with another social organisation – meals for the community in Maipú.

Very few of the workers had any prior experience in agriculture. As such their work was not only an apprenticeship in agroecology, but also a more rudimentary learning in how to tend a garden. Nicolás valued these lessons within the climate of austerity politics that Argentina was experiencing in 2018, suggesting, “It can save you in the economy, it can save even more than thirty percent of what you spend, commonly, at the grocer”. Fernando similarly explained the economic potentials of skills he had gained at the farm. As he showed me the garden of tomatoes and pumpkin he was cultivating, he explained “You only need a small garden to feed yourself”, adding “With fifteen tomato plants you can feed a family the whole summer.” Fernando wanted to give workshops to demonstrate this fact. For him, this would be “Doing politics on a really local level” (*hacer políticas en un nivel muy local*). Both young men viewed the economic benefits of maintaining a garden as important, linking this to the state’s political-economic situation. In both their responses, tending one’s own garden was cast as an appropriate strategy within harsh economic conditions. While in Nicolás’s statement, this is more of a reactive way to survive, Fernando cast self-provisioning in a particularly positive light, as a way of doing “really local level” politics.

Such local self-sufficiency has been actively promoted by the state as it withdraws from the provision of welfare and services. At Huerta Maipú, the SSC operated in conjuncture with the ProHuerta program – through which state agronomists provide capacity building workshops, and rudimentary materials, especially seeds, to impoverished Argentines. ProHuerta, like CCT use in Argentina, dates to the Menem era and was implemented as a means to mitigate harm caused by the regime’s structural adjustment policies; as with the SSC it is funded through the federal Ministry of Social Development.

The retreat of the state in Argentina relied upon both the valorisation of “the local”, which is present in agroecological discourse – as visible in Fernando’s desire to do “really local level politics” – and the masculine ideals I have been discussing. The SSC, in conjunction with other government plans such as ProHuerta, articulated with these ideals and enabled the state to shift the burden of care from itself onto workfare recipients and marginalised households.

Men such as Enrique became the load bearers in this redistribution of care. Enrique was a paragon of the domestically oriented masculinity I discussed above. He would tell me how

handsome everyone in his family was, self-deprecatingly excluding himself. Enrique was proud of his family, and explained that he appreciated working on the farm as he had learned to better care for them. There were the healthy vegetables that agroecology provided, but thinking about ecologies had also taught him the importance of more quotidian aspects of his life; he explained, for example, that because of agroecology he now boiled water to clean it before allowing his family to drink it. Enrique's commitment to his family was reflected in his work ethic. His wife was registered as a worker at Huerta Maipú and received an SSC through the organisation, but her shifts were covered by Enrique. He was one of the few men on the farm who received a double salary, working morning and evening shifts so that his wife could stay home as a housewife (*ama de casa*). This was a situation that Huerta Maipú was happy to enable. Enrique explained that his value to the cooperative was bolstered by the skills he had cultivated across various jobs he had held, and continued to hold. The SSC was the most reliable of various sources of income Enrique obtained, but outside the farm he – like all the elder men – undertook changas to supplement his income. For Enrique this included construction, plumbing, and cleaning homes.

The men of Huerta Maipú represent a particular development in Argentine experiences of neoliberalism. Across Latin America and the Caribbean anthropologists have noted that women have been expected to fashion themselves as flexible subjects of neoliberalism (e.g., Schuster 2015; Han 2011; Freeman 2014; Ellison 2018). In the case of agroecological labour, gender is similarly mobilised in the state's retreat; here masculinity is intertwined with the withdrawal of services – and much like the women whose economic ingenuity these studies highlight, for Maipuense men living by changas meant doing a little of everything. The interaction between masculine forms of domesticity on the one hand, and a demand for neoliberal flexibility on the other mirrors Elana Shever's analysis of the privatisations Argentina underwent during the 1990s, in which it was only through co-opting domestic responsibilities of former state employees that restructuring could take place (2012). The next generation of Argentine neoliberalism, moving from Menem to Macri, manifested less as privatisations and more as underfunding government services while granting tax breaks to industry (Niedzwiecki and Pribble 2017). Community projects undertaken by workfare recipients were relied upon to pick up the slack caused by this government underfunding. In the case of Huerta Maipú, as with Fuerza Maipú, which I discuss below, community workfare programs rested upon expectations of masculine labour and domesticity, but as I have argued, the expected masculinity itself was constituted through notions of race, labour, and national-citizenship. It was only through articulating with these intersecting discourses that a the miscellaneous changa worker could be relied upon as a stopgap against neoliberal

restructuring. The inclusion promised by nationally prescribed dictates of masculinity, then, represented a cruel optimism, a sense of hope that ultimately inhibited flourishing.

Fuerza Maipú

While the state project of enrolling the men of Huerta Maipú in provisioning food for their impoverished community may seem relatively benign, the stakes were significantly higher as these same men were again leant upon to organise and maintain health services in the peri-urban municipality. Here I explore these same dynamics of somatically concerned masculinity buttressing the state's retreat through *Fuerza Maipú*, Maipú's only drug rehabilitation centre, organised by Huerta Maipú.

In January 2019, Ramón had organized a visit from SEDRONAR, the national body for drug policy and treatment. The meeting was to determine whether SEDRONAR would finance *Fuerza Maipú*, run through a house Fernando had rented a few blocks west of the farm. In the weeks before the visit, the workers from Huerta Maipú were drafted to do repairs around the house. The older men put their experience gained through *changas* to use. They fixed appliances, refitted piping, waterproofed the roof, and repainted the interior walls. The younger men were also asked to contribute, establishing a large patch for tomatoes, pumpkins, and herbs in the garden.

I asked Ramón how much money he was hoping to receive from SEDRONAR. He replied that he was asking for 12,000 pesos (320 USD) a month to pay someone who had a background in psychology, as well as start-up costs of 180,000 pesos (4800 USD). He told me, however, that he hoped this latter number would be higher, as 180,000 was based upon similar SEDRONAR programs run the previous year, and 2018 had seen 40 percent inflation.

When Julio from SEDRONAR arrived, he sat down with the founding members of Huerta Maipú – Ramón, Mario, and Manuel – as well as Fabiola, from the women's cooperative. Julio led the discussion. He started by explaining the history of the grant for which the group was applying, which would establish *Fuerza Maipú* within a system of community led drug-rehabilitation centres (*Casas de Atención y Acompañamiento Comunitario*) set up by the Fernández de Kirchner government. Julio asserted that the purpose of the meeting was to assess whether *Fuerza Maipú* had the capacity to become a point of reference for all of Maipú in combating addiction.

Throughout the day, Ramón, Mario, and Manuel stressed that this project emerged from community demand. Ramón noted, however, that as agronomists and farmworkers they did

not have the skills necessary for interventions. When Julio asked how many people were currently using the house for treatment and counselling sessions, Manuel replied that approximately thirty to forty people were receiving treatment and that an addiction counsellor was currently coming twice a week. This took Julio by surprise; and he exclaimed that thirty was a large number for the group to be dealing with unassisted. These responses surprised me as well, as they were not true. No patients had begun receiving treatment at the house, nor had the movement contracted drug-counsellors. I had not been privy to conversations in which members had agreed upon the numbers they would report to SEDRONAR. It had, however, been repeatedly emphasised to me that it was important to show that projects like this were already functional; that the state would not provide initial funding for community projects, but would rather help continue already established ones.

In his closing remarks Ramón reemphasised that this was a political movement. Julio interrupted: “That’s not what we’re talking about today. Being from the outside you shouldn’t waste time [discussing political credentials]. Emphasise your work, what you do”. Ramón stopped and reworked his statement to reflect solely the community service the cooperative was providing. Julio then gave a positive summary, noting that the movement had all the capacities to perform the role of a rehabilitation centre in the community. He acknowledged that SEDRONAR worked with organisations such as this one because they have local connections, and knowledge of the community. While he did not provide a commitment one way or the other, Julio did conclude that he saw it as necessary that Maipú have a project such as this. “There are twenty-five thousand people living here,” he said, “and there is no service”.

Fuerza Maipú received 160,000 pesos (3780 USD) for initial costs, as well as 12,000 pesos a month (270 USD) for operating costs. This, as the SEDRONAR employee stated, was to service a population of some twenty-five thousand people.

That the responsibility for providing health services should be left with community groups is a noteworthy aspect of the reorganisation of the state in Argentina. In her history of welfare in Argentina, Donna Guy explores the long tradition of the involvement of women’s philanthropic societies in healthcare provision (2009). Government subsidised, private organisations such as the Society of Beneficence largely involved themselves with maternal and infant health, but were also active in community hygiene and sexual education campaigns. Guy places the wresting of control from the Society of Beneficence over its hospitals and other institutions by the Peronist government as a crucial moment in the consolidation of a centralised and expansive welfare state (2009). That public health should

again be delegated to community organisations receiving state funds is, then, telling of the trajectory of Argentine welfare provision. Neoliberal states' reliance upon community groups for health services has been discussed by Andrea Muehlebach (2011) in Italy, and Julia Paley (2001) in Chile. Paley incisively belies the supposed dichotomy between civil society and the state, suggesting that in certain contexts, "Civil society organisations serve as more than 'legitimizing' or 'demobilizing' mechanisms for international lending institutions and governments, they are also used to deliver services that, before structural adjustment policies, the welfare state used to deliver" (2001, 145).

By drawing upon the willingness of community groups such as Fuerza Maipú, legitimised through a discourse of "local connections" the Argentine federal state achieved a low-cost means to manage health crises. Not to fall for neoliberal myths of cost-efficiency, it is worth noting that while the Macri government was relying upon workfare recipients to deliver treatment for drug-addiction, it was pursuing a costly militarisation of the national borders supposedly to curb drug trafficking. Drug policy was less about budget repair, and more about a redirection of funds in line with the Macri government's neoliberal ideology and political connections with the armed forces. Inadvertently, the men of Fuerza Maipú enabled this diversion of funds. Motivated by a desire to help people suffering from drug addiction, and to overcome the stigmatising association between marginal communities and illegal drug use, they undertook a project of community-led healthcare. In doing so they accepted the redistribution of responsibility for citizens' welfare being attempted by the federal state.

Conclusion

Of the precarious lives lived in conditions of cruel optimism, Berlant writes:

To understand collective attachments to fundamentally stressful conventional lives, we need to think about normativity as aspirational and as an evolving and incoherent cluster of hegemonic promises about the present and future experience of social belonging (2011, 167).

Normativity, then, at once entails a promise of social inclusion, but at the same time demands commitment – an onerous demand for people whose subjective reality is distant from normative ideals. In the Argentine context, this dynamic of a promise of inclusion within legal and affective national-citizenship, premised upon the demand of normative conformity to gender and class dictates, represents a "Catch 22" for men such as my interlocutors. As I have detailed throughout this chapter by way of the concept of pyrrhic nationalism,

undertaking the labour involved in meeting normative demands helped to hollow out the economic and legal benefits that civic belonging promised.

While the ethnographic data on which this chapter is based was collected during the Macri presidency the continued usage of Fuerza Maipú as a health resource by the federal state after Macri's 2019 defeat reinforces the notion that Peronist governance has, too, contributed to the dynamic I have discussed in this chapter. Despite initially managing the COVID-19 pandemic well through a strict nation-wide lockdown, during the second half of 2020 Argentina was suffering from some of the highest numbers of infections in the world. In this period, the state again lent upon the men of Fuerza Maipú to carry out important health interventions. This time, the peri-urban rehabilitation centre was transformed into a community testing clinic.

In noting this through line between Kirchnerism, the Macri presidency, and the government of Alberto Fernández, I am not suggesting that neoliberalism and populism share some hidden political affinity, but rather I am continuing the task I have set myself throughout this thesis of highlighting the agency of populist supporters. Not all agential acts are liberatory. Saba Mahmood (2001) invites analysts to avoid seeing agency and oppression as opposites, but rather understand all agency as occurring within relations of domination. By developing on Berlant's concept of cruel optimism, I have used the analytic of pyrrhic nationals to show that popular participation through projects that promise inclusion can ultimately lead to subjects being caught in coercive relations with the state. Studies of populism need to be attuned to the agency of populist supporters, but such a recognition does not presuppose that a good life necessarily follows expressions of agency.

Berlant's cruel optimism prompts analysts to consider the conditions involved in obtaining ostensibly positive goals. In this chapter I have followed this prompt to offer a vision of masculinity that takes account of the commitments the nation-state extracts from men, rejecting the idea that masculinity exists as a site of competition or that the nation is a vehicle through that men can attain dominance. Analysing the commitments normativity demands should give us pause in thinking about the relationship of supposedly privileged identities – the *trabajador* and masculine citizenship more broadly – to the nation-state as both legal-polity and imagined community. These identities are not pre-social, nor are they insulated from the political and economic contexts in which they exist. It is, then, necessary to think through the costs associated with attaining, and maintaining them. The concept of pyrrhic nationalism offers a means to explicate the occasionally self-defeating pursuit of celebrated

identities. In cases such as those I have laid out here, masculine identities enable a claim upon the promise of social inclusion offered by the nation, but are simultaneously operative in enabling structural state violence.

Conclusion

Introduction

While throughout this thesis I have argued for an alternative, and, when compared to most theorists of populism, more generous understanding of populism, I have not undertaken this out of a personal commitment to populism. I do not consider myself a populist. Rather, I have treated populism more kindly than other academics might, due to a commitment to inclusive politics and self-determination. This is not to suggest that populism, even Argentine populism, is necessarily an inclusive political project. Rather, I argue that the way populism is routinely dismissed in popular and academic writing evidences a deeply exclusionary approach to the political. Here I will provide a brief recap of the arguments I have made about populism in this thesis, highlighting the moments in which my examination of populist politics has brought up ideas of democratic participation. Politics is for everyone, and, contrary to the way it is often depicted in popular discourse, I see this as particularly true of environmental politics.

The contradictions of Argentine political life make Argentina a particularly compelling site for troubling ideas of democratic participation. Politics exhibits an immediacy in quotidian lives to an extent seen in few other locales. It does not disappear into the bed rock but rather exists at the surface level, serving as the basis for intensely felt social identities: Peronist and anti-Peronist, Kirchnerist and Liberal. Likely due to the degree to which redistributivist politics has been organised around movements metonymically associated with a small number of centralising leaders (Juan Perón, Néstor and Cristina Kirchner) pro-poor politics have been decried as anti-democratic by academics (Finchelstein 2016; cf. Lewis 1980), as well as media pundits in Argentina and internationally.

Neither Perón, nor the Kirchners could be described as champions of democracy. Throughout the Perón-era and the Kirchner years attacks were made by governments on the strength and independence of democratic institutions. Perón engaged in a project of repression against political enemies and filled government and civil organisations with loyal allies; the Kirchners used the legislature to persecute the conservative media, cynically stacked the Supreme Court and – as Perón had done before them – ignored judicial rulings which were unfavourable to their governments. At the same time, however, the governments of Perón and the Kirchners relied upon – and extended – democratic participation. As I discuss in chapter four, Argentine crowds have had an immeasurable impact on national politics, manifesting in support of democratic and Peronist causes since the mid-twentieth century. In turn, Perón's regime massively extended franchise by granting women the vote, and recognizing Indigenous claims

to citizenship. Under the Kirchners a system of electoral primaries was instituted, at least ostensibly to shift democratic power from party-elites to citizens; this dove-tailed with the horizontalist turn of the Kirchner governments away from a verticalist power-structure which linked Peronist powerbrokers to union bosses, and towards a more expansive coalition of community movements.

Without diminishing the importance of party-politics, my focus in this thesis has been on the possibilities for grass-roots participation which exist in the tension created by a movement hostile to the institutional norms of democracy, but reliant upon the participatory ideals of democracy. In Chapter One I discussed the issues related to top-down readings of populist mobilization. By exploring the ways in which politically viable coalitions had been built in the Peronist era and during the Kirchner years, I highlighted the importance of pre-existing political and intellectual movements which informed the populist regimes. The political agency of individual segments of populist coalitions is particularly clear in the case of the Kirchner governments, and I detail both the lengths which Kirchnerists went to in order to align themselves with constituents, as well as the power of populist publics to shape the political project of the Kirchners and assure Kirchnerism as the dominant faction within the Peronist party. Rather than top-down, then, populist power is thoroughly multi-directional.

In Chapter Two I was similarly concerned with political agency. I demonstrated the issues associated with the body of literature which makes use of the analytic of environmentality. As in Chapter One, I rejected the top-down understanding of politics and have provided an ethnographically detailed account of the creative ways in which agroecologists in Córdoba discuss politics. I draw upon the literature on conspiracy theory as a means to both describe the deep divide which organises Argentine political culture, and to analyse the scale at which agroecologists conceptualise politics as taking place. I placed the emergence of agroecology in Córdoba in its historical and political context, and by examined the deeply pointed, interpersonal political theorisation which common in agroecological discussions of harm. By doing so, I again pointed to the importance of seeing politics as engaged in on a quotidian basis, rather than as something imposed down upon publics, as the environmentality literature theorises.

In Chapters Three and Four I draw out the liberal double-bind which seeks to exclude populist political participation. By delimiting politics to an immaterial idealism, liberals overlook the ways in which subjects engage with populism through everyday acts of worldmaking. As populism lacks the canonical texts expected of political thought, and as it demonstrates an ability to

articulate itself with other (supposedly more substantive) ideologies, analysts routinely bracket the beliefs of populist publics and focus on the discourse of populist leaders. The projects of populist movements often contest liberal economic orthodoxy and always rely upon a Manichean division society, as a result the discourse of its leaders is dismissed by liberals as nothing more than empty promises and professional scapegoating; a demagogic project lacking political substance. While the first half of the liberal bind depicts populism as too ephemeral, the second half suggests it is too concrete. Liberal thinkers, as well as more radical academics, point to the excess of emotion which supposedly exists as bodies crowd together to delegitimise populism. Building upon the theorisation of crowds developed by an emergent – and deeply conservative – social science during the second half of the nineteenth century, anti-populists suggest that populism is somehow more affective than other ideologies. In what staid liberal theorists imagine to be a zero-sum game, this affective excess equates to a cognitive deficit. The excitement of crowds – generally made up of bodies whose racial and class identities diverge from the imagined middle-class “reading publics” of European coffee houses – serves as proof of the emptiness of the speaker’s promises. The liberal double-bind suggests populist projects are simultaneously nothing but the empty promises of a demagogue and too deeply felt by publics; populist political participation becomes impossible by these terms.

While throughout this project I highlight the agency of my interlocutors as they participate in political activism, in Chapter Five I show how such participation can have ultimately harmful consequences for peri-urban communities such as the one I worked in. That the back-and-forth of populist and neoliberal rule in Argentina has created a situation in which social organisations are pressed into service to ameliorate the effects of the retreat of the state through community labour does not detract from the political agency of these workfare participants. As Mahmood (2001) so cogently demonstrates, agency always and only exists within relations of subordination. The fact that the desired object may inhibit flourishing does not make the steps we take to achieve it any less our own.

Throughout this thesis I have endeavoured to demonstrate the depth of populist publics’ participation in democratic politics, as well as the sincerity with which populist ideological commitments are held; I have also been motivated by a desire to trouble popular imaginings of who engages in environmental activism. In Argentina – as in many parts of the world – environmental activism is derided as the posturing of the middle-class, detached from the bread-and-butter issues which are meant to represent the limits of “the political.” Conservative media outlets argue that Argentine environmentalists do not understand the importance of

export agriculture to the national economy. In Malvinas Argentinas, pro-development lobbyists tried to discredit the anti-Monsanto activists as out-of-towners, disconnected from the struggles of the marginal barrio. When I put the criticisms of soy to an agronomist working in the sector his retort was to make the claim that those who criticise soy cultivation are silent on the much more aggravated harms felt by Bolivians working in Argentina's peri-urban green-belts exposed to pesticides (as opposed to the supposedly less-potent insecticides used in soy-farming).

Agroecological activism in Argentina puts the lie to both of these “just so” depictions of political action. It is largely Kirchnerist but does not fit models of political patronage; it is thoroughly concerned with environments, but takes as a first principle the health and wellbeing of economically and socially marginalized communities. The economic supports for poor and working-class Argentines put in place by the Kirchner regimes were largely funded through export taxes placed on soy. And yet, contrary to what might be expected if one were to follow Peronism's critics, the peri-urban and rural Argentines who disproportionately received such supports actively resisted this developmentalist model. The conflict at Malvinas Argentinas was an almost personal rebuke of Cristina Fernández de Kirchner, as it was she who announced the government's agreement with Monsanto to construct the seed-processing factory. Contrary to the claims of the plant's boosters my own ethnography, as well as surveys conducted by CONICET social scientists at the time (Mazallay et. al. 2014), show that residents of the poor peri-urban municipality were thoroughly involved in staging this protest. Cordobés agroecologists are, however, deeply concerned with issues of economic injustice (themselves often being the victims of economic exclusion). Agroecologists positioned themselves in contrast to organic farmers by highlighting the “accessible” prices of their produce, likewise agroecology was explicitly discussed as a means to generate employment opportunities. That agroecologists in Córdoba were overwhelmingly the recipients of threadbare social welfare plans should demonstrate the falsity of claims that environmental politics is a concern only for the middle-class.

Of course, there is truth to the idea that some versions of environmental politics are exclusionary, privileging upper-middle-class, white, male identities. There is nothing inherent about this affinity, however, and in the next section I turn to how the praxis of agroecological activism can offer a blueprint for a just and democratic form of environmental politics.

Agroecology and the politics of noticing

Agroecology, particularly as it is practiced in Argentina, offers insights into what a more democratic environmentalist politics may look like, and in this section I will develop a discussion of an environmental politics that includes as a foundational principle acts of noticing human situatedness within ecologies. Although I argue throughout this thesis that Córdoba's agroecology fomented a set of political commitments which ultimately bolstered the power of Argentina's populist party, its praxis is also an expression of adopting noticing as a principal of environmental politics. By this I mean that the act of noticing entails the sort of embodied attunement to ecologies that agroecologists practiced, their refusal to distinguish between ideas of human-health and the environment, and their recognition of the swarming business of non-human activity that works to structure farm-scapes. Córdoba agroecologists were also, however, working toward a type of environmental politics which was forced to account for the way in which humans are impacted by the ecologies in which they live. This, I suggest, is the macro-scale implication of noticing as a first principal of environmental politics: acknowledging that environmental, industrial, and agricultural policies always have localised outcomes, and as such environmental politics cannot be discussed in the abstract but always in reference to real human lives.

In suggesting a politics of noticing as a basis of environmentalism I am building upon a number of recent works in environmental anthropology that have pointed to noticing as an embodied epistemology. As I discussed in Chapters Two and Three, agroecology is a form of bio-intimacy (Weston 2017), it prompts practitioners to think through the intra-relationships they maintain with the ecologies of which they understand themselves to be a part. Agroecologists develop their perceptive senses through intense, embodied engagement with material things as they work to diagnose problems with soil structure, or the potency of natural fertilisers, to understand the cause of shrunken or dull-coloured vegetables and fruits, or to identify the presence of unwanted non-human life on farm sites. Kristina Lyons' work on agroecology in lowland Colombia similarly foregrounds the life-changing effects of noticing, as she describes the process of becoming "the Amazonian human" as "an emerging relationality, an assemblage of practices that problematizes modern object–subject dualisms, relying on an ontological division between 'nature' and 'culture', 'labor' and 'rest', and 'working farm' and 'natural forest'" (2020, 156).

Agroecologists' acts of noticing human situatedness are not limited to agroecological sites or materials, but rather entail a means of assessing the material world in which practitioners find themselves. Even the most dedicated agroecologists in Córdoba were unable to fully avoid

conventional-agriculture – either due to the lack of availability of agroecological version of staple foods, or because the soy-economy so thoroughly dominates rural Córdoba that it is impossible to truly isolate oneself from it and its diffuse chemical inputs. As I have catalogued throughout this thesis, agroecologists turned the same embodied attention that they paid their own produce to conventional agricultural goods: describing them as leaving a bad taste lingering in the mouth, drying the mouth out, as lacking flavour, or as upsetting the stomach. For Andrew Matthews, noticing names a variety of practices of encountering “people, plants, animals, and soil” (2018, 386) which serve as the basis for understanding the multiple, entangled histories that have given rise to landscapes. This noticing has an obviously political edge as histories of war and capitalist extractivism have so deeply shaped the landscapes of central Italy where Matthews works. Guntra Aistara likewise discusses landscapes as the sediment of human and non-human histories, and suggests that forms of attention cultivated through alternative farming practices enable these histories to be read (2018). Noticing, then, offers the basis for agroecologists to politically theorise anthropocentric environmental degradation, to understand how such damaged environments in turn cause damage to human inhabitants, and to begin to think through how such spaces might be restored to conditions in which human and non-human life can thrive.

Building out from the acts of individual agroecologists, I suggest that noticing human situatedness within ecologies should serve as the basis for a socially just environmental politics. In making this claim I am drawing upon a long history of activism and scholarship in the environmental humanities that has worked to centre ideas of environmental justice (Bullard 2000; Brown and Mikkelsen 2007; Taylor 2014). An environmentalist project which is blind to the way human communities are differentially affected by ecological pollution – predominantly patterned along racialised lines, but organised along axes of class, caste, and gender as well – is a project rooted in white supremacy and in service of extractive capitalism. Beyond being aware of how environments materialise inequality, noticing human entanglements with ecologies also means noticing the way in which dense ecological relations make human lives viable, meaningful, and enjoyable (Besky 2019; Kosek 2006; Pitrou 2017; Johnson 2019; Archambault 2016). Just as environmental politics must be attuned to the way in which communities are differentially exposed to environmental harm, so too must it avoid the false neutrality that comes with not accounting for how ecologies may be differentially valued across different social and cultural groupings.

Noticing, as a means of knowing environments, resists more abstracting and more violent epistemologies. Environmental anthropologists have demonstrated that capitalist and

imperialist projects often rely upon the standardisation of agriculture, rendering it “legible” for extraction (Scott 1998; Dove 2011; Tsing 2015). Relatedly, Glen Stone (2007) describes the agro-industry’s promotion of GM technologies as entailing an “agricultural deskilling”. Andrew Flachs (2019) expands upon this insight by showing how GM technologies lead to farmers’ experiential knowledge becoming less reliable, while plant biologists employed by agro-industrial enterprises come to monopolise agricultural expertise. Against such arms-length-decision making of state and capitalist projects, Iris Marion Young develops a critique by exploring environmental pollution and industrial waste (1983). She argues that given the impossibility (and indeed, undesirability) of neutral decision making, decision making processes become questions of justice. Young claims that “self-determination should be a *prima-facie* principle of justice” (1983, 171), and such a principle “states that social decisions ought to be made by those most affected by the outcome of the decision, whether in terms of the actions they will have to take or in terms of the effects of the actions on them” (1983, 180). Read through a lens of democratic self-determination, rather than populism, this thesis contains a catalogue of such acts of localized decision making. Agroecologists act against the sort of legibility making which might be expected from a developmentalist project, such as that of Kirchnerism (especially when one considers the central role soy-export taxes played in financing such development). Noticing does not rely on the standardization of agriculture, but rather upon knowledge built through long-term relationships. Noticing as a fundamental principle of environmental politics promotes the self-determination of communities, resists logics of extractivism and takes into account how people are differently affected by environmental, industrial, and agricultural policies.

Even where epistemologies are not implicated in extractivist violence, modernist forms of knowledge based upon universality have failed to comprehend the hyper-localized nature of environmental suffering. Bio-medicine has been notoriously ill-suited as a discursive avenue for enunciating suffering by the victims of capitalist industrial-toxicity. An ecologically connected world is too far removed, and too filled with variables and contingencies, for an epistemology based upon laboratory conditions (Shapiro 2015; Goldstein and Hall 2015). To foreground noticing would be to prompt a reframing of the scale at which environmentalist politics operates, and in doing so reappraises what counts as evidence. Sheila Jasanoff (2010) suggests that the predominance of climate change discourse entails an imaginative scalar project in which the worth of localised ecological knowledges is diminished against a spatially unbounded “climate”. This reframing establishes an “impersonal, apolitical, and universal imaginary of climate change” (2010, 235) at the expense of “subjective, situated, and normative imaginations of human actors engaging more directly with nature” (2010, 235).

Again, the scalar framing that environmentalists engage in is thoroughly patterned by social demographics. Nayanika Mathur (2015) suggests that a discourse of climate change served to over-ride the politically pointed claims of environmental degradation made by marginal Indians in the Himalayas. I am by no means advocating that environmental politics abandon the challenge of combating climate change. But it is telling that while climate change dominates environmentalist discourse in wealthy locales of post-industrial countries, in Argentina, working among a group deeply committed to environmental politics, I can count on one hand the number of times climate change was raised in my ethnographic data. An environmental politics grounded in noticing is not in opposition to action on climate change, but would be committed to epistemologies of understanding the environment that adopt a more local level, in turn enabling a more grounded comprehension of how climate change is experienced on a local level, and how it interacts with other ecological and political factors.

Future directions in research

The return to presidential power of Peronism in early 2020 is likely to have changed the nature and internal relations of the populist coalition, a process heightened, of course, by the COVID-19 pandemic. All of the ethnography that has served as the basis of this thesis was undertaken during the Macri presidency. Indeed, when I left the field, my interlocutors were still of the belief that Cristina Fernández de Kirchner would be the Justicialist presidential candidate. Fernández de Kirchner, aware of her unpopularity within certain branches of the party surprised political watchers by announcing that she would be running as the vice-presidential candidate on a ticket she shared with Alberto Fernández.

Future research on agroecological farming in Argentina would prove valuable as a means to understand how coalitions based upon unresolved popular demands are maintained while no longer part of the political opposition. It would be valuable to ask how the agroecological movement has developed now that Peronists are in charge of federal agricultural policy. The Macri government, responsible for both the economic exclusion of marginal Argentines and for policies that promoted the ecologically disastrous soy boom, offered the diverse grouping of people involved in agroecology a shared target against which to direct their discontent. While Fernández has made positive signals towards environmentally friendly, small-scale farming, and has been publicly critical of soy as generating rural unemployment (La Voz 2020) he has still overseen an economy based upon environmentally damaging resource extraction. That the government has raised taxes on soy exports compared to the Macri regime is unlikely to resolve internal tensions within the agroecological movement regarding Peronism, but rather

will heighten them, as differently situated practitioners are forced to balance the economic supports soy affords them against the ecological catastrophe it represents.

The pandemic is likely to have further heightened tensions internal to the agroecological movement. Agroecology entails a means of theorising health that is more expansive than mainstream bio-medical conceptions of health. As I discussed in Chapter Two, while agroecology itself is not a conspiracy theory, it is surrounded in Argentina by conspiracist thought. A number of my informants expressed their vaccine hesitancy to me. Again, then, a tension most probably exists within the agroecological movement, with practitioners who are committed to theorising health in its most expansive sense and who are distrustful of government control justified through healthcare policy facing off with those agroecologists desiring an active state in marginal communities, such as the men discussed in Chapter Five, whose community medical centre eventually came to function as a vaccination clinic. These are unlikely to be neat delineations, however. The intellectual and political commitments of others rarely map cleanly against the expectations of theorists. The way in which agroecologists critically engage with health messaging, and weigh up the costs and benefits associated with soy exports as a source of revenue for welfare spending will offer researchers insights into how populist political commitments are developed, and deployed as cognitive frameworks without falling into the reductive answer of personalism.

Moving from the particular case of agroecological support for Peronism to discussions of populism more broadly I hope that this thesis will have prompted new avenues through which anthropologists can approach populism. As I noted in the introduction, the task of approaching populist commitments through an ethnographic analysis of the quotidian has been relatively un-confronting for me, when compared with the same task outside of Argentina. Although European and North American iterations of populism are likely far less palatable to many anthropologists (myself included) than Peronism, if scholars hope to understand the political functioning and appeal of populism, ethnographic research among populists themselves is an indispensable mode of analysis. It is only through such research that researchers can appreciate the full extent to which populist ideology impacts subjectivities, value systems, and decision making. As I have argued throughout, this entails moving beyond populism as discourse (and especially beyond looking at elite level discourse) to appreciate the material things involved in fomenting populist ideology. The boom in anthropologies of infrastructure (Chu 2014; Harvey and Knox 2015; Anand 2017) over the past decade strikes me as a particularly opportune body of literature to bring together with studies of populism. Problematising the grandiose spending of populist leaders using the methods and insights this

body of literature has produced would be valuable to our understanding of populism, it could speak to the differential construction of “the people” through infrastructure, and provide insights about how ideology structures subject’s quotidian interactions with infrastructure.

There is much work to be done beyond the material as well when investigating populism. In this project I have circled around the role of the body in populism, although I have treated questions of the body largely as semiotic ones: the body as itself a sign in populism as well as the seat of semiotic experience. Similarly, Cody (2015) Tambar (2009) and Samet (2013) speak to the semiotic role of bodies in populism, while Mazzarella sees in populism a return to fleshiness, after the staid idealism of liberal technocracy (2019). A more phenomenologically minded approach to populism might build upon these insights that link populism and bodies, to offer insights as to the experiences of populist embodiment.

More traditionally political social anthropology, too, would be valuable to examining the internal dynamics of populism. In Argentina I have discussed populism as existing within a particularly polarised electorate – this sits well with the Manichean logic identified by many theorists as central to populism. How might such Manichean logics fit within European populisms existing as they do within multi-party democracies? What does populist coalition building look like, when coalitions have to be built with subjects who reject populism?

The tightrope of environmental politics

Examining the role of the non-human in politics – a set of relations generally considered to belong to humans alone – necessitates being flexible with the analytic tools we use. The categories through which social scientists have come to understand suffering as well as acts of political resistance are not quite up to the task; at the same time, however, rejecting these categories altogether risks falling into the trap of the sort of detached misanthropy that the boosters of capitalist extractivism hold out as a caricature of environmentalism writ large.

Throughout this thesis I have worked to avoid simplifying the relationships of my interlocutors with agroecological matter. For a group made up largely by marginalised, racially marked, farm workers – people who fall outside the narrow ideals of Argentine citizenship – it is tempting to see their engagement with agroecology as an expression of this exclusion. Indeed, exclusion is a key analytic in this thesis, as I discuss the way in which agroecologists experienced the narrow politics of the Macri years after the comparatively inclusive Kirchner era. But, contra authors such as Jean and John Comaroff (1999; 2000), the heterodox epistemologies and practices which I have discussed here are not simply a means of expressing discontent with

the state's trajectory of economic development which my interlocutors felt was abandoning them. Rather, in engaging with agroecological materials, farmers were taking part in meaningful, value-laden relationships that far outstripped the economic. The story I have been relaying in this thesis would not be the same broad strokes regardless of the setting; the materials of agroecology cannot be substituted out for any other given things.

On the other hand, attending to the relationships that agroecologists developed and tended to with the ecological world does not require doing away with the analytics social scientists have developed for understanding inequality, violence, and suffering. My interlocutors regularly voiced their sense of exclusion in terms familiar to the lexicon of social scientists. In the opening pages of this thesis, I acknowledged that unlike many theorists working on issues of the environment my concerns in this project are thoroughly anthropocentric. While I am certainly committed to a research agenda that questions the modernist, liberal image of the individual as disentangled from their social and ecological relations, this does not necessitate decentring the human as an ethical concern. Environmental anthropologists influenced by the ontological turn have been eager to promote alternative conceptualisations of "the political" that do not rely on or privilege anthropocentric cosmologies (De la Cadena 2010; Kohn 2007; Kirksey 2015; cf. Bessire and Bond 2014). Although there are certainly methodological and epistemological debates to be raised between this research agenda and my own, the real point of distinction is a more axiomatic ethical one, and as such is one unlikely to be resolved here.

In this work I have sought to do justice to the meaningful, more-than-human relations through which my interlocutors made their lives, as well as the pressing economic concerns that conditioned their possibilities. Populist ideology, I argue, was fomented by both more-than-human relations and economic exigencies. Populism had the added appeal for Argentine agroecologists of taking the concerns and knowledge practices of marginal farmers at face-value; of not submitting concerns of toxic pollution to standards of bio-medical evidence or rendering such concerns secondary to a technocratic discussion of climate change. Both the more-than-human relations, and the economic anxieties make up the political. And an environmentalism, or an environmental anthropology, that does not take account of both is not fit for purpose as a means of theorising the hyper-localised nature of human relations to ecological surrounds.

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