“Look North”: Conspiracy and the Sojazación of Argentina

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Abstract. The scientific community now overwhelmingly agrees that genetically modified organisms (GMOs) are safe. Yet vigorous public debate continues worldwide about the entry of GMOs into the environment and food chain. Unique to the Argentine context, however, is that expert and civic debates about GM soy have more to do with the redistribution of export profits than with potential environmental or health risks. In this essay, I examine Argentina’s GMO expert regulatory bodies and recent conspiracy theories as spaces where I would expect concerns to be voiced about the “dark side of the soy boom” (Lapegna 2013)—but are not. I argue that conspiracy theory involving GM soy’s economic prospects reveal both a pervasive unease about the industry, and that GM soy more closely indexes economic anxieties than environmental or health concerns. I explore the production and circulation of knowledge about GM soy that led to its role in economic sovereignty. I develop the idea that conspiracy centers on Argentines’ deepest concerns and ask whether the GM soy industry is seen more as an obstacle to redistributive politics than as a threat to the health of the Argentine population.

Keywords. Argentina, GMOs, Conspiracy

Near the end of her last term in office, Argentine President Cristina Fernández de Kirchner received her first email from the Islamic State. She initially thought she had been targeted because of her close relationship with Pope Francis, but it was not long before she offered up a different explanation: “If something should happen to me, don’t look to the Middle East, look North.”

The emails began to arrive in October 2014 after a contentious legal battle. New York District Court Judge Thomas Griesa had just ruled on a decade-long court battle between the Argentine state and a small group of hedge funds that were seeking full repayment on debt still owed from the largest default in financial history back in 2001. Many still blame the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank for the collapse since it came on the heels of years of structural adjustment. Between 2001 and 2005, Argentina experienced political and economic instability until Néstor Kirchner, the leftist governor of Santa Cruz province, was elected to the presidency. The IMF had by then issued a loan repayment schedule, but in a show of economic
dismissed Kirchner’s theories as conspiratorial, describing them as the ranting of a woman who is “extremely thin-skinned and intolerant of perceived criticism” (The Guardian 2010). I believe this interpretation is inadequate. Following anthropology’s renewed interest in conspiracy theory (West and Sanders 2003), I also argue for the productive capacity of conspiracy to articulate social anxieties (Harding and Stewart 2003) and offer alternative truths that “fill the explanatory void” (Comaroff and Comaroff 2003, 287). Conspiracy theories should not be dismissed as “paranoid delusions” (Hofstadter 1965) but rather should be examined closely to identify issues of pressing social concern. In line with this logic, Kirchner’s warnings about sojeros’ [soybean farmers] dubious intentions—which could either indicate her own preoccupation with their notoriously tense dynamic or be a political calculation meant to tap into the economic anxieties of the electorate—lead me to probe their relationship further.

Expertly drawing on the bounty of suspicions—indeed based on historical precedent—about Northern designs on Argentine sovereignty, Kirchner mapped out a network of unlikely co-conspirators plotting to derail her progressive agenda. Much of the Northern media coverage

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1From this point forward, Kirchner refers to Cristina Fernández de Kirchner.
began to specialize in GM soy for export. In fact, the success of the GM soy industry was a critical component in rebuilding the economy after the 2001 collapse (ibid.). Moreover, the spread of GM soy was instrumental in Argentina’s emergence as a key player in Latin America’s “pink tide.” Nonetheless, the GM soy industry that flourished initially because of deregulation and the Kirchners, who championed redistributionist politics often relying on profits from GM soy exports, were philosophically at odds, resulting in enduring tensions. A point of agreement, however, seems to be that the economic benefits from an expansive GM soy industry far outweigh potential risks to the environment and health. Many scientists, politicians, and activists agree with Argentina’s pro-GMO model and herald the potential of GMOs to tackle some of the world’s most difficult to solve problems, most notably ending world hunger and the use of fossil fuels. Their optimism, however, has been met by fierce skepticism about whether this agricultural technology can effectively and ethically achieve such lofty goals.

Anxiety surrounding the proliferation of agricultural biotechnology has been intense worldwide. Unique to the Argentine context, however, is that civic debates about GM soy have more to do with economics than potential risks to human health and environmental sustainability, making many Argentines’ prevailing GMO-related anxieties remarkably dissimilar to those experienced elsewhere. In the United States and Europe, for example, it is common to hear activists’ express concerns over whether GMOs are safe to eat (Hakim 2016). Experiences in Argentina also stand apart from other countries in the Global South where Mexico’s well-studied ban on GM maize (Quist and Chapela 2001) and India’s mislaid hope in golden rice (Shiva 2002) have garnered much of the attention. In Argentina, there is huge emphasis on the positive effects GM soy has had on the national economy (Newell 2009) and disagreement on how to allocate export profits (Leguizamón 2014). Kirchner’s elision of science-related anxiety reflects a broader trend in public discourse across Argentina and prompts questions into Argentina’s overwhelming acceptance of GM soy (Liberatore and Funtowicz 2003). I argue that conspiracy theory involving GM soy’s economic prospects reveal both a pervasive unease about the industry, and that GM soy more closely indexes economic anxieties than environmental or health concerns.

I use this paper to explore how knowledge about GM soy in Argentina has circulated in such a way that it emerged as a symbol
of economic sovereignty. I develop the idea that conspiracy centers on Argentines’ deepest concerns and ask whether the GM soy industry is seen more as an obstacle to redistributive politics than as a threat to the health of the Argentine population. I begin with an overview of Argentina’s agricultural history to situate my discussion of how the interplay between Argentina’s GM soy industry squares with Kirchner’s theory of a “global modus operandi.” Next, I show how early regulatory mechanisms established to regulate GMOs may have contributed to the explosive uptake of GM soy in Argentina. Then, by putting anthropological literature on conspiracy in conversation with science studies scholarship on risk, I establish the parallels between institutional risk assessments and conspiracy theories, with each configuration trying to make sense of a universe of possible threats. Since I have not yet conducted in-country doctoral fieldwork, this essay is intended to pose more questions than it answers. Nonetheless, the preliminary conclusions I offer draw on data collected during a 2012 pilot study on Argentine agricultural practices, archival research completed in 2015 about Argentina’s influence on international GMO regulatory policy, and a review of media coverage on GM soy and the Kirchners’ presidencies.

**Agriculture in Argentina**

A century ago, Argentina was developing faster than the United States, Canada, and Australia in terms of population growth, per capita income, and total income (Cavallo et al. 1998). It was more than just Argentina’s explosive economic development, however, that inspired comparisons such as U.S. President Theodore Roosevelt’s when he fondly referred to Argentina as a “sister republic” (Salvatore 2008). Buenos Aires’ elites placed virtually no restrictions on European immigration in hopes of fashioning their nascent democratic institutions and cultural style on a European model (Celarent 2011). Following the settler logic of the time (Wolfe 1998), the rural interior’s nomadic gauchos and indigenous peoples were often viewed as impediments to national progress. Many urban elites argued they should be removed and replaced with a more “ideal type” (Shumway 1993). Decades long wars, known as the “conquests of the desert,” ensued whereby soldiers fighting at the behest of urban elites violently pushed back Argentina’s frontier. Developers backed by British investment² then began to develop Argentina’s interior infrastructure by constructing railroads and shipping lanes intended to import culture and...
export agricultural goods (Gordillo 2011).

Since then, however, the country has faced periods of intense economic and political crisis (MacLachlan 2006). In fact, Argentina is the only country in the world to have gone from developed to developing in the last century (Pellegrini 2013). Critics call this Argentina’s “century of decline” (The Economist 2014) and blame unrestricted immigration policies that welcomed Europe’s least desirable citizens (Salvatore 2008), Peronism’s price controls that initiated periods of hyperinflation (Manzetti 1992), and military coups that led to periods of authoritarian rule (The Economist 2014). This stark divergence from the United States’ trajectory has led many to question Argentina’s presumed similarities with North Atlantic nations and to ask instead, what happened?  

Economic conditions at the end of the twentieth century were again worsening after a brief period of growth in the 1990s. By late 2001, the IMF refused to release its next loan installment, the Argentine government was paying employees in IOUs, and then President Fernando de la Rúa’s administration froze bank accounts. Infuriated, Argentines took to protesting in the streets across major cities. And by the end of December 2001, clashes between protesters and police became so intense in the capitol that President de la Rúa fled the presidential palace by helicopter. By then, though, Argentina entered the largest debt default in financial history.

Yet despite dismal economic indicators at the national level, the Argentine agricultural sector was undergoing a rebirth that began in 1996 legalization of GMOs. Farmers and landowners were planting GM crops in record numbers each year. Today, GM soy is farmed on approximately 60% of the country’s agricultural surface and GM soy makes up 25% of all exports (Pellegrini 2013). Remarkably, sojaización expanded steadily during deregulation in the 1990s, the 2001 economic collapse, years of political crisis, and the rise and now fall of Kirchnerism. Upon winning the 2005 presidential elections, Néstor Kirchner made good on his promise to restart social programs terminated during Argentina’s neoliberal era in the 1990s. Again, soy exports were put to political work and financed the re-expansion. The state has taken consistent advantage of its early adopter and leading producer status to forge new trade partnerships, most notably South/South connections that bypass conditions imposed by

3 Indeed, this line of questioning is extremely problematic most importantly in how it assumes racial composition should ensure a certain degree of national success. Nonetheless, it describes what remains a prevalent way of conceptualizing Argentina.
financial institutions and nation-states in the Global North. In a show of support for the soy industry, Argentina’s recently elected center-right president, Mauricio Macri, stated he would progressively reduce soy export taxes as he guides Argentina back toward greater integration with global markets. Throughout changes in dominant political and economic ideology, GM soy farmers have benefited from a dearth of state regulation.

Economic necessity can only partially explain GM soy’s popularity in Argentina. Indeed, many argue GM soy has been essential to debt servicing and that “without agribusiness and oil, Argentina would never [have met] the surplus [the IMF was] demanding” (Elsztain in Smith 2003). Argentina’s rural land barons, meanwhile, wielded their political influence to maintain a favorable regulatory climate (Newell 2009). According to World Bank data, 91% of Argentina’s population lives in urban centers, with nearly one third of the country’s population living in the capitol city of Buenos Aires and surrounding neighborhoods. Even with so many Argentines living in urban settings, a small cohort of landowners remain political heavyweights in domestic politics. The Sociedad Rurale, the rural lobbying group that represents Argentina’s largest landholders, advocates for policies that maintain the unregulated spread of transgenic crops (Fishlow 2013). Moreover, the majority of transgenic crops are typically produced for animal consumption abroad, not human consumption domestically. Unlike Bt-11 maize that sparked heated debates about safety for human consumption, few Argentines have to decide whether they want to consume GM soy varieties (Newell 2009). Finally, when GMOs were legalized in Argentina, the United States had already completed testing and developed a regulatory framework, helping Argentine companies and regulatory bodies save on start-up costs and vetting processes normally associated with novel technologies (Cap 2004).

Benefits from the rapidly expanding soy industry appear side by side with the less-discussed negative consequences such as pesticide over-exposure, illegal land grabs, and loss of small farmer autonomy (Teubal 2004). In considering the “dark side of the soy boom” (Lapegna 2013), anthropologist Gaston Gordillo argues that soy’s expansion is entirely contingent upon “sacrifice zones”: geographies destroyed at the altar of profits and, in the case of Argentina, of the promise of a socially inclusive progress” (Gordillo 2014, 17). Between 1996 and 2008, the area used for soy cultivation nearly
tripled, growing from six million hectares to 16.7 million hectares, and has since expanded even further. The destruction of space “increases amid waves of economic acceleration and operates through...the idea that the planet is a blank, available surface to be exploited for profit” (ibid., 82). Sojeros exhausted existing farmland in the pampas early in the sojazación process and now push the agricultural frontier outward into the Gran Chaco, which is being deforested at one of the fastest rates in the world, to Salta in the northwest, to Santiago del Estero, and all the way to Rio Negro province in the far south of Argentina. Access to new land is often gained through evicting already marginalized peoples. Evictions have turned bloody on more than one occasion resulting in the deaths of four activists from peasant and indigenous organizations at the hands of the police and hired thugs—the culprits have yet to be prosecuted (Lapegna 2013). In ways that bear striking resemblance to victims from the “conquest of the desert” and political dissidents who were “disappeared” during the 1976-82 military junta, the absence of environmental regulation and the ready support for soy expansion shows the state to be complicit in wiping criollos and indigenous people “off the map” in service of capitalist imaginaries and national progress (ibid., 129). And while these negative consequences have profound effects, they seem mostly to affect already marginalized communities, and only very recently and with limited success, entered national level debates about the future of GMOs in Argentina.

Architecture of Conspiracy
Well into President Cristina Kirchner’s last term in office, reports of scandal in Argentina began to appear regularly in international headlines. The floodgates opened a year earlier with a legal dispute over economic sovereignty in which a group of U.S. hedge funds, known as “vulture funds,” filed a lawsuit in New York State District Court to compel Argentina to repay outstanding debt from its 2001 default. A legal dispute over economic sovereignty, in which Kirchner characterized “vulture funds” as the enemy of Argentine economic sovereignty, was beginning to snowball. The Kirchner administration soon became embroiled in scandals about judicial corruption, the suspicious death of Chief Prosecutor Alberto Nisman, and the country’s beleaguered economy. Not only were the mounting scandals threatening Kirchner’s progressive legacy, but for some, it was becoming harder to believe that the firestorm was mere coincidence. By the end, Argentina’s Intelligence Secretariat (SIDE), the judiciary, Jewish community groups, powerful
leverage this tension when she pushed back against the maelstrom of conspiracies threatening to engulf her administration.

We have local financers among us who conspire with the vulture funds; we have the soybean farmers who have lost fortunes for being silly and not selling the beans on time as they were recommended. They preferred to speculate with prices by sitting on a third of the soybean crop, while prices dropped from almost 600 dollars to 360 dollars. (Kirchner, October 2014, MERCOSUR press).

This was not the first time the Kirchner administration came to blows with the GM soy industry over trade policies. Back in 2008, sojeros protested Kirchner’s tax hike on soy exports by blocking arterial roadways connecting GM soy-producing regions with port cities for months. Most importantly, Kirchner’s objections are economic in nature. Nowhere does she mention that the GM soy industry is depleting Argentine soil, inciting illegal land grabs, or using dangerously high levels of pesticides. If anything, Kirchner admonishes the industry for not exporting more soybeans. The absence of environmental and health issues that generate so much political action
death only drew further scrutiny about her possible involvement. Paul Singer also launched a website to disseminate Nisman’s 300-page criminal complaint about the alleged cover-up. Prior to his death, Nisman accused high-ranking officials in the Iranian government of the AMIA bombings. Even though this became most people’s working theory, it has questionable underpinnings. Most notably, in 2008 Nisman issued an arrest warrant for former president Carlos Menem and his brother, the children of Syrian immigrants, for allegedly derailing an investigation into Syrian involvement in the attacks. Also, a former FBI agent involved in the case, James Bernazanni, stated evidence of Iranian involvement was tenuous at best (Filkin 2015).

Initially, it appeared as if Nisman’s death was a suicide and Kirchner readily agreed with those findings. But once the suspicious circumstances surrounding Nisman’s death started making international headlines, Kirchner changed her position (Gilbert and Gladstone 2015). Instead, she accused SIDE of involvement saying, “They used him while he was alive and then they needed him dead” (2015). Because Nisman did not have the financial resources necessary to launch a full-scale investigation into the bombings, he relied on alternative sources. He frequented the American Embassy elsewhere reveals there is indeed something peculiar about GM soy’s primacy but also that it is deeply embedded in the Argentine economy.

The tension between Kirchner’s administration and the GM soy industry was just one piece of much larger geopolitical puzzle that once assembled, appears meant to draw on persistent anxiety about Northern financial interests sabotaging the Argentine economy. Though seemingly convoluted at first, there is an elegance to the way in which Kirchner organized her political adversaries as enemies of her political base, the urban, working class. The following is a discussion of the many different moving parts and is meant to illustrate Kirchner’s damming of the GM soy industry.

Kirchner claimed “vulture funds” masterminded Alberto Nisman’s investigation into Kirchner’s alleged involvement in covering-up Iranian involvement in the 1994 AMIA Jewish Community Center bombings in Buenos Aires. Nisman’s apparent murder took place the night before he was scheduled to present his findings to the Argentine Congress and just after he requested a judge freeze $23 million dollars of Kirchner’s assets. At first glance, it looked like Kirchner had the most to gain from Nisman’s death. Her subsequent and at times clumsy attempts to prove her innocence in Nisman’s
to report and exchange findings, but also relied heavily on Argentina’s Director of Counterintelligence, Antonio (Jaime) Stiusso, who consistently pointed Nisman to Iranian involvement, even though provenance of Stiusso’s intelligence remains unclear. SIDE is widely regarded as corrupt and believed to have significant influence over the Argentine judiciary with a poignant legacy from the Dirty War (Goñi 2015). At one point in the 20-year-long investigation, investigators discovered that SIDE supplied the presiding judge with 400,000 pesos to bribe a key witness for the prosecution when Buenos Aires police officers involved in a car theft ring were suspected of supplying the car used in the bombings (Faulk 2012).

Kirchner also alleged that Nisman and Singer were allies in derailing a burgeoning Argentina-Iran partnership. Back in 2013, Argentina’s Foreign Minister, Héctor Timmerman, entered a joint Argentine-Iranian “Memorandum of Understanding.” The memorandum outlined a “truth commission” dedicated to a collaborative investigation into the 1994 attacks (La Nación 2013). It seems to have been a first attempt by Kirchner to encourage Interpol to withdraw “red notices” on Iranian suspects. According to Nisman and others, this could have generated trade between Argentina and Iran. Specifically, it would have been a food for fuel exchange (Goñi 2015). Kirchner administration officials, however, disputed this claim on the premise that high sulfur content in Iranian oil is 6 times what Argentine refineries allow. Kirchner’s now defunct memorandum could have been meant to needle perceived adversaries such as the United States and Europe, but may have also been out of necessity due to Argentina’s increasingly isolated position in the global economy.

During the final stages of his investigation, Nisman was heard saying, “If necessary, Paul Singer will help us” during an address to Argentina’s main Jewish umbrella group, DAIA (Goñi 2015). Nisman seemed to count on Singer’s record of speaking out against Argentina’s potential collaboration with Iran as well as his financial contributions to the group. Singer, meanwhile, used Argentina’s dealings with Iran as further justification that they should be forced to repay debts at the full amount. In July of 2014, Singer wrote a letter to then U.S. Attorney General Eric Holder urging him to side against Argentina during the “vulture funds” disputes, arguing that “at a time when the rest of the world (including the United States) is attempting to isolate Iran to pressure it to give up its nuclear program.” Moreover, American Task Force Argentina,
Singer’s anti-Kirchner advocacy group, financially contributed to several U.S. lawmakers who in turn issued public statements warning that “rewarding Argentina’s decision to flout well-established international principles regarding the orderly restructuring of sovereign debts has clearly emboldened its leaders to defy other international norms with impunity” (Mercopress 2013).

Kirchner alleged that Singer offered financial assistance to Argentina’s Jewish groups in support of lobbying efforts to stymy trade agreements with Iran. Last spring, Argentina’s first Jewish Foreign Minister, Héctor Timerman, resigned his membership from the AMIA Jewish Community Center and DAIA citing egregious, “obstructionist” actions regarding the investigation into the 1994 bombings. Similarly, former director of DAIA, Jorge Elbaum, published an article outlining back-alley agreements between Israel, “vulture funds,” and Argentine Zionists operating both within the government and amongst civil society. Accordingly, each is accusing Singer, via Argentina’s Jewish groups of seeking to destabilize the center-left government (Elbaum 2015).

GM soy in Argentina has not sparked widespread controversy over adverse effects to the environment, health, and the rural labor market (Delvenne et al. 2013; Stone 2010). Instead, it has become a tool and symbol of economic sovereignty that at once builds on Argentina’s longstanding reliance on its agricultural productivity to assert global influence, and places Argentina as a world leader in this agricultural revolution. Many still think there is something unsettling about the GM soy industry even though controversies surrounding GMO cultivation and consumption do not resonate as widely in Argentina. Soy’s critics in Argentina have only recently gained traction in condemning their adverse effects. Yet still, it seems that growing attention to the “dark side of the soy boom” is still, mostly, about the industry’s financial interests, and not the environmental and health effects (Lapegna 2013). Kirchner’s placement of the GM soy industry among this international cabal came about a time of growing economic uncertainty. And the way in which she framed the threat posed by the industry was in economic terms. This was surely a political calculation meant to save her presidency, which suggests that her choice for framing the GM soy industry in economic terms was her best shot at tapping into pervasive anxieties. If this was her most effective strategy, the next question must be, how did GM soy bypass contentious civic debate about health and environmental risks and jump right to its role as economic
Regulatory Expertise in Argentina

Like several other Latin American states in the 1990s, Argentina was a transitional democracy recovering from dictatorship, turning increasingly to free-market solutions prescribed by financial institutions in the North. Former President Carlos Menem put Argentina through a textbook neoliberal restructuring by privatizing state-held industries, dollarizing the economy, and decimating social welfare programs (Cieza 2008). He also maintained a climate of deregulation for the agro-industrial complex at the behest of powerful interest groups (Newell 2009). One byproduct of structural adjustment was the legalization of GMOs at the height of the IMF’s regional influence, making it the first country to do so in Latin America. Promptly following legalization, production of cereals surpassed livestock production, which had been a stalwart of the Argentine export market (Food and Agriculture Organization). The regulatory framework first established for GMOs set the tone for decades to come.

Before the end of the Washington Consensus, regulation throughout Latin America reflected neoliberal values of privatization and liberalization (Delvenne, et al. 2013). Regulatory bodies were meant to operate outside the political realm and produce regulations grounded in scientific and technical expertise (Yeung 2010). Dubash and Morgan argue that in the case of South American regulatory bodies, however, extensive international pressures coupled with a strong climate of redistributive politics where “regulation is too important to be left to the regulators” (Dubash and Morgan 2012) seems to have undermined objectivity.

In 1996 when GMOs were legalized, Argentina had no laws specifying how to regulate GMOs (Pellegrini 2013). The state responded by establishing one of the first GMO regulatory bodies in the world. The three branches of Argentina’s agricultural regulatory bureaucracy, in charge of environmental risk (CONABIA4), health risk (SENASA), and market risks (DMA), are cast as expert organizations, despite notable conflicts of interest (Pellegrini 2013). Industry and corporate interests are well represented throughout the regulatory process, which prompts questions about whose interests they serve. CONABIA, for example, is tasked with producing environmental risk assessments, and is the first regulatory stop for new products CONABIA. It is a “multidisciplinary

4 Comision Nacional Asesora de Biotecnologia Agropecuaria
interinstitutional advisory group responsible for evaluating scientific and technical issues associated with the potential impacts of GMOs” (ibid., 12). CONABIA is run by a body of experts, including many from the private sector. As of 2014, Syngenta and Dow AgroSciences sent experts to serve on CONABIA, and Monsanto and Bay Crop Science representatives advised in the Chamber of Fertilizers. Argentine biotech firms also loan experts to CONABIA (Pellegrini 2013). Public research institution experts serve on CONABIA in roughly equal numbers as the private sector experts. Many public experts, however, rely on funding from private corporations to conduct their research (ibid.). The process typically takes six years for a new product to pass through Argentina’s increasingly complex and strict regulatory screening process. Interestingly, this seems to benefit large, well-funded multinational corporations because few others can afford the legalization process for novel agricultural products (Delvenne et al. 2013). It stands to reason that the [overwhelming] presence of experts from private biotech firms and long processing times contributed to the comparatively light GMO regulation in Argentina.

Once a novel product successfully makes its way through CONABIA and SENASA, the DMA then begins to assess market risks. Scholars note that Argentina’s regulatory process tends toward being a “policy-mirror” (ibid.), meaning regulatory experts look to safety standards in places where Argentine GMOs are exported most often. An example of this dynamic is when the European Community (EC) instituted a moratorium on imports of GM agricultural products from 1998 until 2003. The EC espouses the precautionary principle, which means if a new product’s risks are unknown or are controversial, it should not be introduced until those issues are resolved. The EC based its own regulatory procedures on two directives: first, Directive 2001/18 is concerned with “the deliberate release into the environment of genetically modified organisms.” The second is European Community Regulation 258/97, which regulates “novel foods and novel food ingredients” (World Trade Organization 2010). The EC was operating under the guidance that each state has the “sovereign right to make its own decisions on GMOs in accordance with the values prevailing in its societies” (BBC 2006). Individual member states were empowered to interrupt regulatory proceedings with those Directives that allow objectors to implement “safeguard measures” based on scientific findings even after European Community-wide approval (ibid.). Argentina’s DMA failed to legalize a
single new GM product throughout much of the EU moratorium even though some products were approved by SENASA and CONABIA until 2001 (Delvenne et al. 2013). Even though Argentina is a global producer of GMOs and the EC a consumer, the “policy-mirror” model espoused by Argentine GMO regulators is limited by sound science norms in the Global North, even though the EC’s rejection of GMOs is out of line with scientific consensus.

Several other factors have allowed GMOs to embed deeply in Argentina: The absence of traceability standards, no distinction between transgenic and non-transgenic seed varieties, and perhaps most importantly, the fact that legalizing novel seeds looks only at the product itself, not the process (Delvenne et al. 2013; Pellegrini 2013). Taken together, existing regulation seem almost entirely economic in nature, and when regulatory hurdles are imposed, they address risk assessments being produced elsewhere.

**Conspiracy and Risk**

Argentina’s national regulatory bodies were so successful at framing GMOs as safe and sustainable that most controversy and conspiracy have to do with economics and not environmental and health issues. If such sweeping conspiracies simply ignore the environmental and health issues, is it plausible that GM soy’s stability in the Argentine economy is taken for granted? I have drawn heavily from Harding and Stewart’s description of conspiracy theory “as an embodied anxiety that articulates the stresses, contradictions, and dreams of redemption of a subject under the influence of diffuse and haunting social, political, and discursive force fields” (2003, 264). Crucially, Kirchner’s expansive conspiracy theory touches on an array of issues most important to Argentines, such as independence from the Global North, the nefarious power of rural land barons, economic sovereignty, and religious freedom. It does not, however, mention the effects that GM soy is having on rural populations and the environment—an issue that could have easily been framed to emphasize implications on sovereignty, economics, and corruption. Therefore, it is the absence of conspiratorial thinking about environmental and health risks that is most remarkable.

When historian Richard Hofstadter began publishing on conspiracy in 1964, conspiracies were often ignored in academic discussions (Hofstadter 1964). Until recently, Hofstadter’s approach prevailed and conspiracy theories were dismissed as “bizarre and irrational” (Ostler 2003) or “silly and without merit” (Keeley 1999, 109), even pathological (Hellinger 2003) musings of
misinformed paranoiacs. What little anthropological scholarship there is on conspiratorial thinking was originally reserved for deciphering the “strange beliefs” of non-Western peoples (West and Sanders 2003). Recently, however, anthropologists have started attending to why conspiracies develop, what conspiracy does for believers, and what aspects of social worlds conspiracy reflects in new and insightful ways. Especially in the global South, conspiracy theories are “legitimate forms of knowledge production” (Mahmud 2012, 1185). Like occult cosmologies, a topic more typically studied by anthropologists, scholars are showing that there is more going on than what meets the eye. Crucially, conspiracies tend to cohere around spaces where power operates, but lay publics are not sure how or to what end. Susan Harding and Kathleen Stewart attend to this process when they argue conspiracy “tracks signs and surges of power, surveils banal surfaces to discover hidden threats and promises, pieces together obscure, disparate details in search of the key to an ultimate puzzle and the moment when the imaginary finally matches the real” (Harding and Stewart 2003, 206). Most importantly, these authors show conspiracy as a sort of broken mirror casting partial reflections of a society’s anxiety.

With the pace of scientific and technical discovery quickening, so expands the universe of possible risks, and anxiety about potentially imminent risks that can accompany these advancements. Political scientists, economists, and policymakers typically manage with the ubiquity of unknowable risk (Beck 1992) through empirical risk assessments such as cost-benefit analysis, expert analysis, and econometrics, to identify potential risks, assess their likelihood, and mitigate adverse effects. Techniques to assess risk are continually refined and approximating reality more closely than ever before. They often gain credibility through reflecting the “completeness” of their model (Jasanoff 2003) or through projecting objectivity (Jasanoff 1990). For realists, experts and expertise are key to determining the extent of and containment strategies for risk (Kusch 2007). In the case of GMOs, controversy surrounds the types of risk and the extent of risk they pose to humans and the environment. Bruno Latour sees the “genius of the model [stemming] from the role by a very small number of persons, the only ones capable of going back and forth” (Latour 2009). The realist model is built on the notion that the truth is out there and will be discovered, deciphered, and translated by experts.

Theories of existential risk, on the other hand, respond to the implicit contradictions of empirical risk. STS
scholars, amongst other critical social theorists (for example, Auyero and Swistun 2009; Gusterson 1998), tend to see the realist approach as flawed from outset to implementation. Building on decades of scholarship, STS scholars reject realists’ attempts to separate the social from the scientific. Instead, Sheila Jasanoff, for example, shows how situated politics shape shared understandings of risk that invariably shift depending on political or social context (Jasanoff 2011). Acknowledging the situated and changeable nature of risk further complicates the realist view that risk can be bracketed and anchored in quantitative terms. Moreover, Brian Wynne criticizes experts’ tendency to privilege scientific expertise and dismiss lay knowledge without due consideration (Wynne 1995). Others note how privileging sites of scientific fact production to prevent the public from “diluting and endangering” the scientific process will more likely diminish the quality of knowledge (Nowotny 2003, 2).

Conspiracy theory and risk assessment are more similar than one might expect. Both the empirical and existential approaches to risk assessment attend to ways people negotiate risk. The realist perspective, however, remains widely preferred from an institutional perspective while the existential is still largely theoretical. With tremendous resources being poured into realist models of risk assessment and mitigation, scholarly attention should also be paid to what happens when these models fail. When well-funded risk assessments fail to predict the eventual outcome, many are left confused, searching for answers outside of mainstream scientific and political voices. It is here, where official narratives stop making sense that conspiracy theories flourish. Crucially, conspiracy theories develop along the same Enlightenment logic of truth seeking through rational inquiry that we see with expert risk assessment. However, when someone or a group senses “that something is not as it is said to be” (West and Sanders 2003, 2), conspiracy can offer an alternative explanation that may “fill the explanatory void” (Comaroff and Comaroff 2003). There exists in Argentina conspiracy theory and institutional risk assessment that build from agricultural history and function to circulate knowledge in support of unfettered expansion of GM soy production.

Conclusion
In this paper, I used conspiracy theories to gauge the constitution of collective anxiety, which I argued includes the GM soy industry—but only its economic aspects. This points both to a broad-based distrust of the powerful soybean industry and the
success of a politically motivated expert regulatory system that allowed Argentina to become an early adopter of GMO farming technology and to advocate aggressively for pro-GMO policy today. Risk assessment experts working at the time of GMO legalization had clear political motivations to ensure the successful passage of GMOs into mainstream Argentine agricultural practices. Their success has been so profound that it all but foreclosed the possibility for widespread civic protest on anything other than economic grounds. Kirchner’s all-encompassing conspiracy theory reflects this division between the process of growing GMOs to the process of exporting them by only questioning the economic motivations of sojeros and not the risks posed to rural communities by increased pesticide used, significant soil depletion, or the mechanized nature of GMO cultivation that is reducing the number of rural jobs. During doctoral fieldwork, I hope to probe what conspiratorial thinking says about expert risk assessments in the case of Argentina’s soyazación. At the heart of the matter is how GM soy so quickly and so completely become the lifeblood of Argentina.

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