

Pyrrhic nationals: The promise and pitfalls of masculine civic belonging in Argentina

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In this article I discuss an Argentine workfare program as an entry point to challenge dominant understandings of the relationship between masculinity and the nation-state. By examining this program as it is enacted in Huerta Maipú, a community farm in the outskirts of Córdoba, Argentina, I explore how materializing nationally appropriate masculinity can impede the realization of the substantive benefits associated with national inclusion. Drawing upon Lauren Berlant's (2011) *Cruel Optimism*, I develop the concept of Pyrrhic Nationals to describe this dynamic. My argument builds upon a subordinated approach to understanding masculinity which I put into conversation with anthropological analyses of the role of civil society in neoliberal regimes. Even though Huerta Maipú was explicitly constructed as an anti-market, anti-capitalist and anti-patriarchal site, materializing masculinities through social and community activism entailed becoming the exact subjects required by neoliberal projects.

Keywords Argentina, masculinity, nationalism, cruel optimism, workfare

Beside the chicken coop at Huerta Maipú, thirty-nine-year-old Luis was telling me about his relationship with his father and brothers.¹ Luis, who is one of seven sons, proudly stated, "We are all *trabajadores*" (workers). 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*,² he was uncomfortable that he received a government benefit, and he told me his goal was that Huerta Maipú be self-subsistent, allowing wages to be paid without state support. As uncomfortable as Luis was with his status as beneficiary of a *plan social* (state welfare plan), he was eager to contrast his labor at Huerta Maipú with that 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 farm labor at Huerta Maipú agroecological collective, 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. Agroecology is an alternative farming movement that promotes using the symbiotic relationships within ecologies to produce food without the use of chemicals. 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. Primarily these opportunities were financed by the SSC, a workfare program instituted in 2015 by the then newly elected neoliberal government of President Mauricio Macri.

In this article, I discuss the SSC as an entry point to challenge dominant understandings of the relationship between masculinity and the nation-state, exploring how masculinity can impede the realization of the substantive benefits of national inclusion. This argument builds on a somewhat subordinated approach to understanding masculinity that 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 Berlant's (2011) *Cruel Optimism*. For Berlant (2011, 1), cruel optimism occurs when "the object that draws your attachment actively impedes the aim that brought you to it initially." I also follow Ghannam (2013) in viewing masculinity as materialized rather than performed. This approach sees masculinity as the outcome of a process of "struggles, challenges, and physical and emotional pressures" (Ghannam 2013, 32). Rather than being a deliberate or fake performance, materialization is attuned to the deeply internalized, 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) that is 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 materialize 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 Córdoba, as they see expansive networks of state support replaced by ad hoc grants to an inconsistent patchwork of community groups.

As I came to realize over fifteen months of fieldwork from late 2017 to early 2019 in Córdoba, Argentina, farming at Huerta Maipú entailed a dynamic of Pyrrhic nationalism. To explain this claim, I begin by discussing the literature on the relationship between masculinity and the nation and by bringing into that conversation anthropological analyses of neoliberalism. Members of the agroecological collective bear little resemblance to historically constructed ideals of national citizenry. I discuss the stigma that is attached to the perceived failings of these farmworkers to conform to national ideals. Rather than challenge the basis for this stigma, members of Huerta Maipú sought to reframe themselves in line with historical ideals. These men—and the workers of Huerta Maipú were almost exclusively men—materialized two alternative forms of locally valorized masculinity to approximate more closely the ideals they believed they should achieve, the *trabajador* and a respectable, domestically oriented masculinity. The successful materializations of these masculine archetypes were the moments in which my interlocutors' nationalism became Pyrrhic.

After discussing how men aligned themselves with national ideals of masculine citizenship, I explore how such materializations were co-opted by the state. Necessities that 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 article, as I discuss these same men being enlisted to organize a community drug rehabilitation center. Here, the neoliberal logic of responsabilization 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.

Examining the SSC offers a means to understand how ideals of masculinity and national belonging interact with global political and economic trends. Latin America has long provided a testing ground for neoliberal reform (Sader 2008), and responsabilization programs—in which states devolve welfare responsibilities to citizens or community groups—are now commonplace globally. Through the concept of Pyrrhic nationals, I center the way the normative commitments of masculinity and national belonging have been pressed into service by neoliberal projects of responsabilization. In doing so, I make the case for reexamining the relationship between masculinity and nationalism, to understand how, to paraphrase Berlant (2011), the hope associated with national belonging would ultimately inhibit men's 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, particularly with regard to Argentina. Studies of masculinity in Argentina largely naturalize the link between masculinity and power. Many authors discuss the place of masculinity in high-prestige social settings; for example, Badaró (2015) in the military, Mendoza (2020) 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 informal workers' gender norms following the millennial economic crisis. Whitson (2010, 171) shows that where economic insecurity prevented working-class men from performing the role of "provider," these men challenged the hegemony of this role through a discourse that equated masculinity with ideals that characterized informal labor: autonomy, independence, and mobility. Archetti (1999) argues that these same ideals were promoted by dominant masculine archetypes that sit outside of Argentine norms of morality and claims that the figures of the soccer star, the tango musician, and the polo player offered alternative scripts for performing hegemonic masculinity in Argentina because of their national significance.

Beyond Argentina, the nation and nationalism retain a privileged place within masculinities literature. A dominant approach within the 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 a sociological crisis. As a result of the diminishing global demand for migrant labor from the islands, 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 this work helped popularize the multiplicity of masculinities, 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 engaged in national struggles, respectively. Competition between multiple masculinities, however, sits at odds with the inherently normalizing imperative of nationalism—the imagined commonality of character and interests on which nationalism is based (Anderson 2006).

In an alternative approach, 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 (Bear 2015; Gill 1997). 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. For instance, when Boellstorff (2004) discusses intranational violence committed by sexually normative men against sexually nonnormative men in Indonesia, it is the nation that the former group perceives as threatened and in need of defense, not men’s personal privileged access to it. Adopting this approach does not mean surrendering the recognition that masculinities are multiple; it means seeing such multiplicity as an outcome of varied, often contradictory, dictates (Forth 2008; Halberstam 1998). 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 these insights into conversation with a growing body of anthropological literature examining how civil organizations are co-opted by the state to ameliorate the effects of its retreat. Ethnographic studies have shown how civil groups such as charitable organizations (Muehlebach 2011; Paley 2001), worker cooperatives and labor unions (McNamara 2021; Shever 2012), 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. Schuster (2015) centers gender in implicating civil organizations in the state’s withdrawal in Paraguay. She demonstrates that the self-same microcredit 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. 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 (2009) identifies have left the social sciences 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. Khoja-Moolji (2018) tracks how the “ideal educated girl” in Pakistan 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 realizing an imagined Pakistani future. The naturalization of the relationship between men and national privilege, however, has left the ways that masculinity is enlisted in neoliberal restructurings, and how such projects are ultimately harmful to the men involved, comparatively undertheorized.

Beyond Ideal Nationals

Far from having a privileged relationship with 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.

Huerta Maipú is in the peri-urban municipality of Maipú, on the outskirts of Córdoba, Argentina’s second largest city. Maipú is one of the poorest municipalities in the province of Córdoba; only



Figure 1 A racialized depiction of the Argentine welfare system, produced by the Ministry of Production and Labor. Source: Balasini (2019).

one-third of the township is connected to the gas mains, and much of it lacks paved roads. Located in Córdoba's *cinturón verde* (green belt), the town was established by farmers supplying food to the city. Because of its relative proximity to central Córdoba, the township's population rapidly grew as Cordobeses began to feel the economic pressure of labor precaritization under the military dictatorship at the start of the 1980s and the anti-poor policies of the neoliberal presidency of Carlos Menem during the 1990s.³ As race and class tightly correlate with one another in Argentina, the new residents of Maipú were predominantly dark-skinned, and a metonymic association between peri-urban barrios and dark-skinned populations has been established in the minds of many Argentines.

This association is deeply stigmatizing for the people of barrios like Maipú. As numerous scholars have noted, there is a persistent belief that Argentina is a white nation (Grimson and Kessler 2005; Guano 2003). Garguin (2017) provides an important historical study suggesting that an ideology of whiteness, and a desire to distinguish Argentina from neighboring Latin American republics, was present in liberal thought even before the waves of European migration of the late 1800s. Other authors have highlighted the thoroughness of this myth's saturation of Argentine society's self-conceptualization, citing stories of Indigenous Peoples' mass extermination or the supposed extinction of Afro-Argentines during the war against Paraguay (Briones 2002; Geler and Rodríguez 2016).

Argentine racial categories are as much economic descriptors as phenotypic ones. *Negro* (black) or *negro de mierda* (fucking black) are commonly used to describe the urban poor. Mario, who is white-skinned and blue-eyed, explained that despite his coloring he could be called "negro" due to his poverty and residence in Maipú. The widespread stereotype of productive white Argentines as opposed to welfare-dependent dark-skinned ones is reinforced by state media. Figure 1 is a screenshot of a graphic produced by the Argentine Ministry of Production and Labor, aimed at communicating the supposedly small number of taxpayers who fund the welfare system. It was

criticized on social media for depicting the employed taxpayers as entirely white and the welfare recipients as dark-skinned. However, such understandings of race are common in Argentina, with dark-skinned and Indigenous Argentines commonly represented as welfare dependent.

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 as delinquents, strangers to an idealized white, industrious, urban Argentina (Guano 2003).⁴ Although my interlocutors critiqued such racist ideas, they simultaneously recognized themselves through these same exclusionary discourses. For instance, Nicolás, a twenty-three-year-old farmworker, spoke incisively about the discrimination that dark-skinned Argentines face. However, he also attributed 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 (Briones 2002; Garguin 2007).

Workers at Huerta Maipú attempted to challenge the idea that they were welfare dependent, as we have seen with Luis. However, Luis did not challenge 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, fill out forms about 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 the steadiest income stream for the workers at Huerta Maipú. The majority of my interlocutors regularly undertook *changas* (intermittent manual labor), ranging from ad hoc construction jobs to subcontracting for the municipality to clear overgrown public areas.

The men with whom I worked were cognizant of how 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 Perelman (2013, 244) worked, the workers of Huerta Maipú undertook “rituals” to cast themselves as “deserving of assistance.” Like Perelman’s interlocutors, the workers of Huerta Maipú took pains to minimize the distance between national ideals and their own realities. Unlike Perelman’s informants, however, whose rituals for inclusion were direct and interpersonal, the workers of Huerta Maipú were attempting to position themselves as legitimate in the eyes of a more ephemeral imagined community.

Affective Citizenship

Luis’s 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 (1946-55). Mendoza (2017, 57) suggests that Argentines live under a schema of “labor-based citizenship.” While political-economic developments since the time of Juan Perón have made full-time unionized work out of reach for many, labor remains the dominant motif through which Argentines imagine their place within the nation. As Perelman (2013) shows, this remains the case even for informal workers.

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 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 their children into a narrow Hispanicist, Catholic model of Argentine citizenship, as laid out in his 1909 work *La Restauración Nacionalista* (see Rock 1987). Drawing on the same nationalist symbols as Rojas, the politician Ricardo Caballero took advantage of the newly broadened democratic franchise to build a successful political movement out of working-class voters throughout the 1910s in Rosario, Santa Fe. As Perón would later do at a national level, Caballero linked working-class culture with popular nationalist symbols and gendered notions of labor 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 (Kalm 2019; Shoshan 2014; Stoler 2007). In Perón's "New Argentina," this entailed reimagining the rights attached to citizenship, an outreach to previously marginalized Argentines, and declarations of national and economic sovereignty demonstrated through the nationalization of industries. The *trabajador* offered a conceptual identity broad enough to integrate an ethnically and class diverse population into a unified national identity. At the same time, unions, as representatives of actual workers, were incorporated into the infrastructure through which social rights were guaranteed (Elena 2011). Of this era, James (1988, 16) 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." 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 (2011) foregrounds the expansion of market consumption, and generally improved living standards among the Argentine working population, as central to the Peronist project of social citizenship. The Peronist state drew on 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.

Returning to Berlant (2011, 2), the *trabajador* exists at the center of that "moral-intimate-economic thing called 'the good life.'" 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 conceptualization of national belonging.

Trabajadores on the Farm

Outside of the national ideal with regards to their racial and economic positioning, my interlocutors turned to masculinity to attain inclusion. The agroecological farm at Maipú provided an arena in which, and the material substrate through which, marginalized men could materialize masculinity. Here and in the next section, I show how agroecological matter lent itself to both a rough-and-tumble *trabajador* masculinity and a more tender, caring masculinity. Both of these masculinities approximate national ideals of manhood.

At an open day at Huerta Maipú the workers demonstrated how to prepare bio-organic fertilizer. 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 shoveling 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. Circe 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 the ability to overcome nature were central to the particular masculinity that agroecologists materialized. Throughout my tenure at the farm, men's rough manipulation of agroecological materials was constant. Weeds were cleared with powerful blows. Logs or 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 as well as strengths or faults of the 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; Haraway 1988; Young 2005). Connell (2005) describes a general masculine imperative of demonstrating agentic capacity by exerting one's presence on the world. While I am hesitant to suggest such cross-cultural universals of masculinity, ethnographies from Turkey to France to Tanzania highlight local categories of masculinity as entailing spatial regimes of bodily extension (Açıksöz 2012; Thorkelson 2020; Weiss 1997). In the Argentine case, this agentic capacity relates to reshaping nature, which has long been constructed as a rival—almost agentic in its own right—in the project of settling Argentina.

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, outside the oil fields the world of Comodoro Rivadavia is a feminized space—and all those who inhabit it are likewise feminized. Salzinger (2003) demonstrates that gender is not only an input to labor but is actively produced by labor practices. Unlike the femininity insipidly provoked in the Mexican factories of Salzinger's (2003) ethnography, here workers deliberately sought masculinity as an outcome of labor practices. The ability to appropriately materialize masculinity offered Maipuenses a means to claim the identity of *trabajador*, despite even the most steadily employed of men working only informal and irregular jobs. Returning to my conversation with Luis, it was through manual labor that he sought to establish himself as a *trabajador* and differentiate himself from supposedly unproductive welfare recipients. Such appeals to manual labor were commonplace among the farmworkers, and the intensity of this labor served as an always ready retort to potential accusations that these welfare recipients were lazy or unproductive.

Domestically Oriented Workers

In contrast to these forceful engagements with agroecological matter, I was regularly struck by the tender attention the men of Huerta Maipú paid to plants and soils. 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 were full of the dark green leaves, and I asked him what he planned to do with them; he replied he would take them home and prepare *torrejas de acelga* (chard fritters) for his family.

It is notable that Luis not only gathered the best produce to feed his family but that he also prepared their meal. The domestic featured heavily in discussions of labor 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 family, and for their own bodies—formed part of the repertoire by which workers at Huerta Maipú sought to contest the stigma they felt. Pérez (2015) argues that an orientation toward 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 both to materially approximate middle-class lifestyles and to communicate a commitment to middle-class moralities of “family togetherness.”

Practicing care helped to frame marginalized men’s masculinity as respectable. Inhorn (2012) suggests that studies of masculinity need to be more attentive to how care can emerge as a masculine value, criticizing Connell’s (2005) work for its lack of attention to care. As noted by Wentzell (2015) and Hurtado and Sinha (2016), highlighting alternative gendered materializations is doubly important in studying Latino masculinities, as it helps challenge a monolithic and politically problematic representation of Latino masculinity as machismo. Through agroecological practice, Argentine men materialized care, taking responsibility for their own health and the health of their families. Agroecologically produced vegetables were not only free of potentially harmful agrochemicals but supposedly were also the richest possible in vitamins and minerals. The smell and flavor of the produce that 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 stigmatized 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, simultaneously enabled anti-poor policies to be implemented successfully. Here and in the next section, I discuss the development of neoliberal 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 antimarket,

anticapitalist, and antipatriarchal site, materializing masculinities through social and community activism entailed 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–50s had resulted in a powerful union movement. The military junta (1976–83) viewed the unions as a potential source of resistance to its regime. Through neoliberal reforms the dictatorship at once sought to reestablish 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 precaritization of labor, while at the same time the state commitment to full employment was abandoned (Grimson and Kessler 2005; Perelman 2013; Undurraga 2015).

Pro-market reforms were deepened during democracy under Carlos Menem (1989–99). Deindustrialization further progressed as the Argentine economy was geared toward agricultural exports (Undurraga 2015). Menem's government adopted conditional cash transfers (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. Néstor Kirchner and his wife Cristina Fernández de Kirchner, governed from 2003 to 2015 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 which took power throughout Latin America in the early 2000s (Kaese and Wolff 2016; Wylde 2014). As with Menem, the Kirchner governments relied on CCTs, albeit ones based on ideas of human capital rather than neoliberal workfare (Fenwick 2016, 135).

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 organization—meals for the community in Maipú.

Very few of the workers had any prior experience in agriculture. As such this 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 Argentina was experiencing in 2018. He said, "It can save you in the economy, it can save even more than 30 percent of what you spend, commonly, at the grocer." Twenty-six-year-old 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 ... with fifteen tomato plants you can feed a family the whole summer." Fernando wanted to give workshops to demonstrate this. For him, this would be "doing politics on a really local level". Both 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 Nicolás expressed this as more of a reactive way to survive, Fernando cast self-provisioning in a particularly positive light, 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 conjunction 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 in part through the federal Ministry of Social Development.

The retreat of the state in Argentina relied both on the valorization of "the local" that is present in agroecological discourse—as visible in Fernando's desire to do "really local level" politics—as well as on the masculine ideals I have been discussing. The SSC, in conjunction with other government plans such as ProHuerta, articulated these ideals and enabled the state to shift the burden of care from itself onto workfare recipients and marginalized 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 earlier. He would tell me about 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. Beyond the healthy vegetables that agroecology provided, he told me that thinking about ecologies had also taught him the importance of more quotidian aspects of his life, explaining, 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. While his wife was registered as a worker at Huerta Maipú and received an SSC through the organization, Enrique covered her shifts. Enrique 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 is 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 only the most reliable of various sources of income Enrique obtained: outside of the farm he—like all the older 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., Freeman 2014; Han 2011; Schuster 2015). In the case of agroecological labor, gender is similarly mobilized 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 Shever's (2012) analysis of the privatizations Argentina underwent during the 1990s, in which it was only through co-opting domestic responsibilities of former state employees that restructuring could take place. The next generation of Argentine neoliberalism, moving from Menem to Macri, manifested less as privatizations and more as underfunding government services while granting tax breaks to industry (Niedzwiecki and Pribble 2017). Community projects undertaken by workfare recipients were relied on to pick up the slack caused by this government underfunding. In the case of Huerta Maipú (and as with Fuerza Maipú, which I discuss in the next section), community workfare programs rested on expectations of masculine labor and domesticity, but as I have argued, the expected masculinity itself was constituted through notions of race, labor, and national citizenship. It was only by engaging with these intersecting discourses that miscellaneous *changa* workers could be relied on 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 relied on to organize and maintain health services in the peri-urban municipality. In this section, I explore these same dynamics of somatically concerned masculinity buttressing the state's retreat through Fuerza Maipú, Maipú's only drug rehabilitation center, which was organized through Huerta Maipú. Here, again, Maipuense men's attempts to materialize masculinity in line with national ideals were Pyrrhic, as their actions effectively subsidized federal drug treatment officials to discharge a duty of care for Argentine citizens.

In January 2019, Ramón had organized a visit from the Secretaría de Políticas Integrales sobre Drogas de la Nación Argentina (SEDRONAR), the national body for drug policy and treatment. The meeting was to determine whether SEDRONAR would finance Fuerza Maipú, run from 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 to use their experience gained through changas. They fixed appliances, refit 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 hoped to receive from SEDRONAR. He replied that he was asking for ARS 12,000 (USD 320) a month to pay someone who had a background in psychology, as well as start-up costs of ARS 180,000 (USD 4,800).⁵ He told me that he hoped this latter number would be higher, as ARS 180,000 was based on 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 and 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 counseling sessions, Manuel replied that approximately thirty to forty people were receiving treatment and that an addiction counselor was currently coming twice a week. This took Julio by surprise; 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 counselors. I had not been privy to conversations where members had agreed on the numbers they would report to SEDRONAR. It had, however, been repeatedly emphasized to me that it was important to show projects like this as 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 reemphasized 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]. Emphasize 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 center in the community. He acknowledged that SEDRONAR worked with organizations such as Fuerza Maipú because they have local connections and knowledge of the community. While he did not provide a commitment, Julio did conclude that he saw it as necessary that Maipú have a project such as this. "There are 25,000 people living here," he said, "and there is no service."

Fuerza Maipú received ARS 160,000 (USD 3,780) for initial costs and ARS 12,000 a month (USD 270) for operating costs. This, as the SEDRONAR employee stated, to service a population of some 25,000 people.

That the responsibility for providing health services should be left with community groups is a noteworthy aspect of the retreat of the state in Argentina. In her history of welfare in Argentina, Guy (2009) explores the long tradition of involvement of women's philanthropic societies in healthcare provision. Government-subsidized private organizations 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 (2009) places the wresting of control over the Society of Beneficence's hospitals and other institutions by the Peronist government as a crucial moment in the consolidation of a centralized and expansive welfare state. That public health should again be delegated to community organizations receiving state funds is, then, telling of the trajectory of Argentine welfare provision. The reliance of neoliberal states on community groups for health services has been discussed by Muehlebach (2011) in Italy and Paley (2001) in Chile. Paley (2001, 145) incisively critiques the supposed dichotomy between civil society and the state, suggesting that in certain contexts, "Civil society organizations 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."

By drawing on the willingness of community groups such as Fuerza Maipú, legitimized through a discourse of "local connections," the Argentine 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 on workfare recipients to deliver treatment for drug addiction, it was pursuing a costly militarization 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. The men of Fuerza Maipú inadvertently enabled this diversion of funds. Motivated by a desire to help people suffering from drug addiction, and to overcome the stigmatizing 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 (2011, 167) 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."

Normativity, then, at once entails a promise of social inclusion while demanding 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 on the demand of normative conformity to gender and class dictates represents a double bind for men such as my interlocutors. As I have detailed throughout this article with the concept of Pyrrhic nationalism, undertaking the labor involved in meeting normative demands helped to hollow out the economic and legal benefits that civic belonging promised.

Rather than a vision of masculinity as inherently competitive, and of the nation as a vehicle through which men can attain dominance, my work suggests looking at the commitments that the nation-state extracts from men. Analyzing the commitments that normativity demands should give us pause in thinking about the relationship of supposedly privileged identities—the *trabajador*, 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-economic contexts in which they exist. It is necessary, then, to think through the costs associated with attaining and maintaining them. The concept of Pyrrhic nationalism offers a means to explicate the hidden costs associated with the pursuit of celebrated identities. In cases such as I have laid out here, masculine identities enable a claim on the promise of social inclusion offered by the nation but are simultaneously operative in the structural violence of the neoliberal state.

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Notes

- 1 Throughout this article I use pseudonyms for the names of the municipality, organization, and men with whom I worked.
- 2 I adopt the Spanish term “*trabajador*” (worker) to reference an imagined ideal, whereas I use the English term “worker” to denote actual workers.
- 3 These processes effectively transformed Córdoba’s *cinturón verde*. See Gutiérrez (2013) and Capdevielle (2014).
- 4 See also the Museo de Antropología (2021) exhibition *Negro Sobre Blanco, 200 Años de Racismo* at Universidad Nacional de Córdoba, curated by the photography collective Colectivo Manifiesto, which demonstrates the continued presence of racist and exclusionary attitudes in contemporary Argentina.
- 5 The Argentine peso (ARS) depreciated rapidly throughout 2018–19. Conversions to US dollar (USD) reflect the value when ARS figures were collected.

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