Railroad revolution: infrastructural decay and modernization in Argentina

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ABSTRACT
How does modernity arrive and take hold? In this article, I examine efforts by the recent administration of Cristina Fernández de Kirchner to modernize railroad infrastructure in Argentina amidst ongoing decay. In the wake of a large-scale train crash and decades of improper railroad maintenance, in 2013 former President Fernández de Kirchner’s administration launched a so-called railroad revolution (revolución ferroviaria), predicated on the purchase of new trains from China, the renovation of track and station infrastructure, the renationalization of the railroad network, and the reeducation of the traveling public. Tracing the awkward arrival of new rolling stock and the patchy renovation of aging railroad infrastructure, this article examines how glitches in this highly-anticipated modernization project fueled anxieties over the incompatibility of foreign technology and local infrastructure, the tenuous nature of modernity, and the obduracy of decay. The technologies and infrastructures that underpin modernity, it illustrates, are entangled in messy relationships and shaped by unruly material histories.

KEYWORDS
Infrastructure; modernity; railways; decay; Argentina

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Revolução ferroviária: Deterioração de infraestrutura e modernização na Argentina

RESUMO
Como a modernidade chega e se apodera? Neste artigo, examino os esforços da recente administração de Cristina Fernández de Kirchner para modernizar a infraestrutura ferroviária na Argentina em meio à persistente deterioração do material. Após um acidente de trem em larga escala e décadas de manutenção inadequada da ferrovia, em 2013 o governo do ex-presidenta Fernández de Kirchner lançou a chamada revolução ferroviária, com base na compra de novos trens da China, a renovação da infra-estrutura de via e estação, a renacionalização da rede ferroviária, e a reeducação do público viajante. Rastreando a chegada desajeitada de novo material circulante e a renovação irregular da infraestrutura ferroviária envelhecida, este artigo examina como as falhas neste projeto de modernização altamente antecipado alimentam ansiedades pela incompatibilidade de tecnologia estrangeira e infraestrutura local, a natureza tênue da modernidade e persistência do deterioro. As

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PALABRAS CLAVE
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artigo ilustra, são enredados em relacionamentos complexos e
moldados por histórias materiais indisciplinadas.

Revolución ferroviaria: Deterioro infraestructural y
modernización en Argentina

RESUMEN
¿Cómo llega y se instala la modernidad? En este artículo, examino
esfuerzos llevados a cabo por la administración reciente de
Cristina Fernández de Kirchner por modernizar la infraestructura
ferroviaria en la Argentina en medio del persistente deterioro
material. Luego de un choque ferroviario de gran escala y décadas
de mantenimiento ferroviario inadecuado, en 2013 la gestión de
la ex Presidenta Fernández de Kirchner lanzó una supuesta
“revolución ferroviaria,” basada en la compra de trenes nuevos a
China, la renovación de infraestructura de vías y estaciones, la
renacionalización de la red ferroviaria, y la reeducación del
público viajante. Atendiendo a la llegada del material rodante
nuevo y a la renovación parcial de infraestructura ferroviaria
envejecida, este artículo examina cómo fallas y errores en estos
sumamente esperados proyectos de modernización despertaron
ansiedades sobre la supuesta incompatibilidad de tecnología
extranjera e infraestructura local, el carácter tenue de la
modernidad, y la persistencia del deterioro. Las tecnologías y las
infraestructuras que apuntalan a la modernidad, el artículo ilustra,
están enredadas en relaciones complejas y conformadas por
historias materiais recalcitrantes.

1. Introduction

“Bienvenido a bordo THE SARMIENTO LINE! La terminal de trenes es ONCE. La próxima parada es terminal ONCE” (“Welcome aboard THE SARMIENTO LINE! The train terminal is ONCE. The next stop is ONCE terminal.”) The announcement, in incongruous Spanglish, scrolls across digital signs placed throughout the sleek new train. As it departs the terminal station of Once, an automated female voice announces, “The next stop is Once.” Two vendors cross each other in the train car’s corridor and exchange smirks. “She came to Argentina and got dizzy,” one tells the other. En route to Caballito station, the train makes a sudden stop. “Testing brakes,” another vendor calls out, mimicking the automated voice.

The chapa (train plate) RC20 glides seemingly effortlessly along the tracks. Yet the automated voice continues off-kilter, announcing the train’s arrival to stations it has already left behind. “It is mistaken,” an elderly woman grumbles. We approach Villa Luro station, recently renovated, a harbinger of impending modernization along the line. It is bedecked in banners corresponding to different political parties and groups sympathetic to the national government: Unidos y Organizados, Nuevo Encuentro, the hammer and sickle of the Communist Party. Cameramen and police officers from the Explosives unit mill around the station. I inch towards the door, weaving my way around other passengers, hoping to descend and perhaps get a glimpse of the President as she officially inaugurates “los trenes chinos” (“the Chinese trains”), as the Sarmiento line’s new rolling stock, imported from China, have been dubbed. The train slows down, but does not stop.
In Liniers, where I descend, another “Chinese train” waits on an auxiliary track. It will carry Cristina, the President, a woman standing by me on the station platform tells me. She has yet to arrive. “They look beautiful on the inside,” her older companion, who saw images of the trains on television, muses. “I hope they are maintained,” the first one responds, “We will see how long they last.”

A train pulls in, yet it is an older Toshiba, the familiar Chapa 2. It is impossibly full, but Liniers is a busy destination and several passengers descend. I manage to squeeze my way onboard. On our way to the terminal, we pass one of the new formaciones (trainsets). “It is already scratched,” an older male passenger tells a younger man, possibly his son. In Once, people mill around the newspaper and hotdog stands. The mural of hearts honoring the victims of the 2012 train crash, assembled by their families and usually visible from the station platforms, is concealed by makeshift wooden panels. Men wearing black jackets with the word “Security” emblazoned on their backs, employees of a private security company recently hired to supplement the Policía Federal, walk in groups of five. The loudspeakers announce that the train service between Once and Liniers has been interrupted (due to the inauguration act, I presume, but no clarification is proffered); times of departure are yet to be determined. A few “Chinese trains” lie idly by the platforms, their doors open. A woman hurries towards one of them, the Chapa RC17, pulling a child along. “Take a good look at it, this will be the last time you see it this way,” she tells her, “Afterwards they will scratch it all up.”

How does modernization arrive and take hold? In this article, I trace the awkward arrival of new rolling stock from China and the patchy renovation of aging railway infrastructure in Buenos Aires, Argentina, in the aftermath of a large-scale train crash and in the wake of decades of infrastructural decay. Drawing from ethnographic research on Buenos Aires’ metropolitan rail network conducted in 2013 and 2014, namely participant observation on board trains and in train stations and repair workshops and semi-structured interviews with commuters, activists, and railroad workers, I examine how glitches in this highly-anticipated modernization project fueled anxieties over the incompatibility of foreign technology and local infrastructure and the obduracy of decay (both infrastructural and “moral”).

Railroads are often portrayed as a quintessential symbol of modernity, as much for their promise of progress (the speed of connectivity, the shrinking of distance, the circulation of people, goods, and ideas), as for their spectacular failures, with train crashes and derailments conjuring specters of technology gone awry (Schivelbusch 1986 [1977]; Aguiar 2011; White 2011; Latour 1996). Railroads have functioned as an infrastructure of empire, facilitating the extraction of raw materials, shaping modern sensibilities of travel and comportment in public spaces (Bear 2007; Lofgren 2008; Urry 2007), affording the standardization of time across locales (Galison 2003; Prasad 2013; Rieznik 2012), and delineating particular configurations of nation-states by bringing certain places into connection while disavowing others (Gordillo 2014).

Argentina’s railroad network is the largest in Latin America in terms of extension, encompassing around 45,000 km of tracks at its peak (Salerno 2014). Throughout most of the second half of the twentieth century, this sprawling grid was managed by Ferrocarriles Argentinos (Argentine Railroads), the railroad state company created after the network was nationalized by President Juan Domingo Perón in 1948. When Ferrocarriles Argentinos was dismantled in the early 1990s, most railway branches and workshops in the interior of

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1All translations are by the author.
the country were closed down, many workers laid off, and freight and passenger lines concessioned to newly-formed private companies. In urban and suburban Buenos Aires, metropolitan commuter trains continued to offer an affordable, if increasingly precarious, means of daily mobility. After Argentina’s 2001 financial crisis, the most dramatic sovereign default in world history, commuters increasingly traveled “like cattle,” and discontent over delays and poor services became widespread, occasionally erupting in acts of violence and arson (see Rebón and Quintana 2010). In 2010, during a public demonstration by railroad workers to protest precarious working conditions, student activist Mariano Ferreyra was murdered by individuals affiliated with the leader of the Peronist wing of the Unión Ferroviaria, the largest railroad union, triggering further widespread protests.

The starkest instantiation of this railroad crisis came on February 22, 2012, when during the morning rush-hour the Sarmiento line’s Chapa 16 collided against the buffers at the end of the tracks in Once station, killing at least 51 people and causing another 789 passengers to sustain injuries of varying degree. This crash, which became known as la Tragedia de Once, shook the nation’s consciousness and constituted a political phenomenon, bringing to the fore decades of railway decay and becoming a symbol of desidia, neglect, and corruption – yet another reminder of the precarity of everyday life in post-dictatorship and “post-crisis” Argentina. The crash crystallized how railway infrastructure, meant to order movement through space and time, can have drastically disordered effects. Yet the Tragedia de Once was hardly a surprise. Disgruntled passengers had been decrying their commuting conditions for several years, and numerous formal complaints had been lodged against Trenes de Buenos Aires (Trains of Buenos Aires, TBA for short), the concession company tasked with operating the state-owned railway line.

Although government officials were reticent to acknowledge the administration’s entanglement in the crash, the renovation of the metropolitan railroad fleet and of track and station infrastructure in the waning years of Cristina Fernández de Kirchner’s presidency (2007–2015) was widely seen by commuter-activists, railroad workers, and rail enthusiasts as a response to the Tragedia de Once (Figure 1). In January 2013, under the newly expanded and renamed Ministry of Interior and Transportation, Minister Florencio Randazzo announced a series of modernization projects that, in his words, would amount to “a real revolution in transport” (Télam 2013). Soon after, three of the main commuter lines, the Sarmiento, Mitre and San Martín lines (which connect the city of Buenos Aires with the western, northern, and northwestern stretches of the sprawling conurbano of Greater Buenos Aires), were renationalized (Figure 2). While Minister Florencio Randazzo’s revolución ferroviaria (railroad revolution) – a term that gained valence across unsympathetic media outlets and skeptical commuter-activists and railroad workers – disembarked in a politically fraught moment, most commuters and railroad workers welcomed the arrival of new rolling stock that would replace the aging Toshiba fleet in service since the 1960s.

While these infrastructure renovation projects, portrayed by different industry news outlets as a “rail revival” (Barrow 2016; Railway Gazette 2010), were certainly accelerated by the Tragedia de Once and its political aftermath, the first purchase of rolling stock from China in fact preceded the crash. This purchase signaled, furthermore, the

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2See, for instance, Graciela Mochkofsky’s (2012) reconstruction of the tragedy.
3The purchase of brand-new locomotives and passenger cars from China Southern Rolling Stock (CSR) Sifang for the San Martín line, for instance, was announced as early as 2006, but the fleet did not disembark at the port of Buenos Aires until February 2013 (Barrow 2013; Lukin 2014; Railway Gazette 5 February 2013).
“thickening” (Armony and Strauss 2012, 4) of relations between China and Argentina, and China’s growing preponderance in the region, as reflected in trade relations, commodity exports, investment in infrastructure, and joint ventures.4

The arrival of new rolling stock and the renovation of track and station infrastructure was presented in official discourse and propaganda as a “modernization” of the railroad system. Modernity has been theorized as a temporal rupture, one that is reflected in shifting modes of governance, uses of social space, and subjectivities. In this regard, modernity is, if nothing else, a “temporal ideology” that “valorizes newness, rupture, and linear plot lines” (Dawdy 2010, 762). Scholars have argued that modernity is a “narrated imaginary” about otherness (Rofel 1999, 13) that is remade as it travels, a “translational process” (Chakrabarty 2000, xviii) marked by disjuncture and deferral. Modernity and modernization are best understood as “projects” (Tsing 2000), never complete, always aspirational. Narratives of modernization, Jim Ferguson (1999) argues in his account of the short-lived prosperity

Figure 1. “[Public] Works for Everybody. We are improving the railways.” This sign, poised over old metal cross ties repurposed as a fence, displays the name of the President (“Cristina Fernández de Kirchner Presidency”) and of the government agencies involved in the renovation (ADIF, the Railway Infrastructure Administration; the Ministry of the Interior and Transportation, newly renamed, as evidenced by the added patch; and the Nation’s Presidency). January 2014. Photo by author.

4On her first state visit to China, in July 2010, then-President Cristina Fernández de Kirchner signed several major contracts to upgrade freight and commuter networks, including the purchase of new rolling stock for freight, commuter, and long-distance passenger trains and for the capital’s subway system, and the electrification of several commuter routes, as reported by the Railway Gazette on 19 June 2010. Per accords signed on that visit, China would also finance several large-scale infrastructure works that it planned to build in Argentina, including hydro-electric dams, a nuclear plant, and a space base (see also Håskel 2015).
heralded by the Zambian Copperbelt, fail to account for the non-linearities and counter-linearities of the present, and the broken promises of progress—and the ruins it leaves in its wake.5

Infrastructures serve as a prime vantage point from which to examine modernity. In his overview of the growing anthropological literature on infrastructure, Brian Larkin (2013, 328) defines infrastructures as “built networks that facilitate the flow of goods, people, or ideas and allow for their exchange over space.” As the “architecture for circulation,” infrastructures provide “the undergirding of modern society” and “generate the ambient environment of everyday life” (Larkin 2013, 328). Recent ethnographers of infrastructure have contested Susan Leigh Star’s (1999) adage that infrastructures become

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5See Benjamin (1968), Gordillo (2014), Hell and Schönle (2010), Tsing (2015).
6According to Ashley Carse (2012, 542), the term “infrastructure,” first used in English in 1927, was borrowed from French, where it in fact referred to “the substrate material below railroad tracks.”
visible upon breakdown, mapping instead the hypervisibility of infrastructure, particularly in the Global South, where it often constitutes a “visible and proximate sit[e] of power and contestation” (Anand 2017, 228). Anthropologists have underscored how infrastructures can have political effects that far exceed those envisioned by their planners. From water pipes to roads, prepaid meters, landmines, and bricks, scholars have shown how infrastructures enchant (Harvey and Knox 2012), attack (Chu 2014), and go rogue (Kim 2016). They have illustrated how infrastructures can serve as the terrain for the negotiation of political claims (Von Schnitzler 2013) and as gathering points for political communities through the engineering of affect (Schwenkel 2013). Infrastructures, furthermore, often trace cartographies of disenfranchisement: Emanuella Guano (2002) and Daniela Soldano (2013) have shown how, in Buenos Aires, train routes, fares, and station infrastructure have functioned as exclusionary devices, maintaining racialized class differences, and keeping particular social groups apart, while Verónica Pérez (2014) has traced the daily suffering of urban train commuters.

Infrastructures are not stable matter: they require practices of maintenance and communities of care to thwart decay. Stephen Graham and Nigel Thrift (2007, 19) have called for more analytic attention to repair and maintenance as the “engine room of modern economies and societies” (see also Anand 2017), while feminist STS scholars have dissected the material consequences of neglecting things (e.g. Puig de la Bellacasa 2011). Ruination, Ann Stoler (2008, 2013) reminds us, is a political project and a sociohistorical configuration, laying waste to certain lives and landscapes, but not others. The work of infrastructure, in a way, is never complete: as Howe et al. (2016) have argued, infrastructure is prone to ruin (degenerating even as it is generative), it requires constant retrofitting to meet new exigencies, and it magnifies and creates risk even as it mitigates it.

Yet projects of infrastructural modernization and repair themselves can be politically and materially fraught. As the following section traces, in the aftermath of the Tragedia de Once, commuters’ and railroad workers’ encounters with new trains and shifting infrastructure in Buenos Aires often proved to be unsettling: as glitches and failures cracked the façade of modernization, Argentina’s place in the world, its modernity, and its future, were called into question.

2. Water Closet Morris

Outstretched arms hold onto chrome bars, obscuring passengers’ faces from the camera’s view. At the far end of the train car, a digital screen is visible above the mostly dark-haired heads. The words “Estación W. C. Morris” scroll across it, as an automated female voice announces in thickly-accented Spanish the train’s arrival at “Water Closet Morris” station. A lone cackle is heard, presumably from the camera’s holder. As the PA system instructs passengers to prepare to descend, the camera’s holder adds, “And flush the toilet!” (“¡Y tiren la cadena!”). “Before descending, flush the toilet in Water Closet Morris,” he repeats, with audible glee.

This YouTube video, shared on Facebook by a railroad worker in April 2014, was one of several such videos to document the unfortunate translation of “William C. Morris” into “Water Closet Morris” aboard new trains on the San Martín line. Located in the partido...

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7The automated voice appeared to mimic an accent from Spain, distinctive from Argentinean Spanish.
of Hurlingham, in the northwestern suburbs of Greater Buenos Aires, the town and station of William C. Morris were named after an English-born pastor, educator, and philanthropist who founded several schools in Buenos Aires. Among train riders and YouTube viewers versed in English, the recasting of the station as a bathroom was met with mirth and indignation, with people complaining and celebrating the locale’s unwitting association with a toilet (inodoro) and a shithole (cagada). Like the automated system on the Sarmiento line that announced the train’s arrival to stations after these had been left behind, “Water Closet Morris” made all-too-explicit the fact that these new trains, meant to order and safeguard daily mobility, were undeniably foreign. These glitches – inaccurate announcements delivered in a peculiar accent – amounted to misrecognitions, and rendered familiar places momentarily strange.8

As the first trains to arrive from China (the first new trains, in fact, to be purchased in Argentina in several decades), the San Martín line’s newfangled fleet served as a harbinger of progress to come in other metropolitan lines. Yet upon their arrival it was discovered that the Chinese rolling stock did not match existing infrastructure: station platforms were too low for these trains. “Look at the aberration we have come to!” Claudio, chief supervisor at a railroad repair workshop, lamented when we met one afternoon in Adrogué, a district in southern Gran Buenos Aires, “We bought high-floored locomotives and coaches (locomotoras y coches de piso alto) for the San Martín, knowing that the station platforms are low.”9 His voice rising in exasperation, he continued,

These [trains] will arrive in a determined quantity of time. All this time, nobody thought of saying, ‘Che, let us start to build at least one high-platform station so that the train can arrive there one day, a platform in Retiro [station]?’ No. That is what I am saying, many things are [done] by impulse.

Bautista, a workplace hygiene and safety specialist employed on the Mitre line, echoed a similar sentiment: “It was all improvisation,” he said of the purchase.

After the first batch of new trains arrived, station platforms along the San Martín line thus had to be raised to meet the floor height of passenger cars. This renovation took several months, and the new fleet did not enter into service on that line until April 2014 – over a year after their arrival.10 In the meantime, three of the new trainsets were temporarily loaned to the Mitre line (which already boasted higher platforms) to provide peak-hour services (Railway Gazette 7 June 2013). These new trains, however, were operated by diesel locomotives, whereas the Mitre line was regularly serviced by electric trains, fed by an electrified third rail. For railroad workers and some ferroaficionados (railway enthusiasts or train buffs), the sight of modern diesel trains circulating on aging electrified tracks was an incongruous, and somewhat unseemly, spectacle. Rolling stock and track infrastructure did not meld nicely: “They brought over Chinese locomotives and there were parts that jutted out from the locomotive … , which could not circulate

8See Von Schnitzler (2013) on how technology – in her ethnographic case, prepaid meters in South Africa – gets reconfigured as it travels.
9Railroad workers’ names have been replaced by pseudonyms throughout the article, except in the case of workers who maintain an active media presence and who expressed preference for their actual names to be used.
10When the fleet was finally inaugurated on the San Martín line in April 2014, some stations were still being serviced by makeshift platforms (slabs of wood upheld by metal scaffolding), while others (Muñiz, Santos Lugares, and La Paternal stations) were temporarily bypassed altogether and serviced instead by free buses (Cabot 2014, Lukin 2014).
because they bumped against the third rail. So, they had to go and cut that piece out,” Bautista recalled.

In Bautista’s and Claudio’s descriptions of mismatching trains, tracks, and stations, improvisation emerges as an idiom through which railroad workers both make sense of the ad hoc nature of infrastructure and critique the state’s inadequate planning. Station platforms that needed to be raised and train parts that had to be chiseled off underscore that infrastructural work is never complete. They evince, too, the *translational* work demanded by modernization, in this case, as an ongoing process of accommodating trains, platforms, and riders (as underscored below) to each other.11

For Mitre commuters, meanwhile, these trains temporarily borrowed from the San Martín line were a novelty and offered a taste of modernized travel. One young man described them as “lemon-scented trains” (*trenes olor a limón*), a welcome, if somewhat sterile, shift in olfactory register. This scent of progress (Flikke 2013), together with a novel chromatic palette (dark blues, peach accents, creamy whites tinged with grey), gleaming surfaces, and a new soundscape (the purr of motors, the hiss of pneumatic brakes, the chime that heralded the opening and closing of doors), created a new sensorial mode of travel – even as soft jolts along certain sections of track served as a reminder of the timeworn infrastructure beneath. Uneven tracks, in fact, limited circulation speed, and on particularly dilapidated sections of track train conductors were forced to reduce speed to avoid derailment.

When the fleet of diesel trains from China finally entered service on the San Martín line in April 2014, the progressive and kirchnerista (i.e. supporter of the Kirchners’ governments) newspaper *Página 12* celebrated the commuter line’s renovation (Lukin 2014). The conservative and anti-kirchnerista newspaper *La Nación*, in turn, pointed out that these trains were new but “not modern” (Cabot 2014), as they lacked A/C and were not powered by electricity, as had initially been promised. The Sarmiento and Mitre lines, in turn, inaugurated their new electric fleets (also purchased from CSR) in July 2014 and November 2014, respectively. Major newspapers, including *La Nación* and *Página 12*, reported that riders were satisfied with the new trains. Several of my interlocutors, particularly railroad specialists and train activists, however, were more ambivalent.

Sonny, a railroad signaling expert, expressed skepticism over the new rolling stock, particularly over claims that these would be equipped with automatic train stop technology to avoid collisions.

What is it that they [the Chinese] have? What was bought? Nobody knows very clearly. The Chinese had a very big accident in Wenzhou, two years ago. The signaling system failed. Something that – how can we say it – *cannot happen*. Even if Murphy’s Law says that everything that cannot fail, will fail.

Paula, a commuter on the Mitre line, meanwhile, had read in the newspaper that these new trains contained toxic substances. “As a [train] user, I do not know [desconozco], and I cannot tell if it is true or not, but one hopes that the investment is well made,” she mused, “I am quite skeptical. I imagine they are not … They are buying what they can buy.”

Others were cynical about the factors that led the Argentine government to import rolling stock and railroad technology from China. Bautista attributed this decision to the

11See also Von Schnitzler (2013).
political fallout after the Once crash and to the need to save face in preparation for elections:

[Decisions] are largely driven by the people’s pressure (la presión del pueblo), to put it one way. When they feel that they are corralled or there are elections, that type of things, they make these … these … famous clutching at straws (manotazos de ahogado).

Ramón, a train conductor, echoed this view:

The Once tragedy was the trigger (detonante), right? An urgency where the government somehow had to give a social answer (una respuesta social) in face of such a failure, product, well, of bad businesses (malos negocios), corruption, irresponsible businessmen, state officials who look the other way, and a series of factors.

Claudio, the repair workshop supervisor, in turn, framed the purchase of Chinese trains within a larger context of trade relations and economic dependency:

Everything was bought from China, and – I will say this again, I give you my presumption. Why was it bought from China? The – There are other operators, other makers, like [CAFT? Kraft?], like Alstom, like Mitsubishi, I do not know, Toshiba, that … that … Siemens too. Perhaps I am forgetting another important one, like General Electric. That have highly developed the railroad system and in fact have it out in the world. But we buy from the Chinese. Why do we buy from the Chinese? Because the Chinese are the main consumers of our products! Yes? So, eh, my presumption …. And I think the minister recently said it … That the Chinese will settle down here. There will … There will come a time when we will not be able to pay the Chinese with money. And the Chinese are not interested in us paying them with money. The Chinese are interested in us paying them with food. Yes? The majority of people … do not see it, or do not want to see it. You are conditioned. It is like … it is like a future mortgage (hipoteca a futuro).

If the purchase of rolling stock from China was seen as rendering Argentina economically vulnerable on account of its financial dependency, the transfer of foreign technology threatened to render the country vulnerable in other ways as well. Ramón summed it as follows: “The country is deferred (se posterga), it gets in debt (se endeuda), and, well, we subject ourselves to a technological dependency.” When we met in October 2014, CSR electric trains had already entered into service on the Sarmiento line, but had yet to do so on the Mitre line, where Ramón was employed. Just the previous day he had begun a training course to learn how to drive the new trainsets. Leafing through the thick manual, he described some of the features he was becoming acquainted with. “They have programs, you see, they come programmed. They have programmed functions,” he explained. “Anyways, it is a very basic knowledge, I tell you, it is nothing … nothing profound, because the Chinese will run it,” he was quick to clarify,

According to what they have informed us, during three years the Chinese will take care of absolutely everything. The only thing that we will touch when we drive those trainsets … is to disable a given function. In the case of an imperfection or failure, or supposed failure, it will go to the depot and there the Chinese will be in charge of repairing, or seeing where the failures are.

Ramón’s description echoes other portrayals I heard that presented new trains as black boxes, and underscores train conductors’ estrangement from the machines they were to drive – a far cry from the intimate, embodied knowledge that conductors relied on to maneuver older Toshiba trains (where the absence or failure of basic mediating technology,
including the lack of speedometers, rendered human experience and expertise paramount). The obscure, cryptic nature of Chinese trains seemingly extended to the purchase of rolling stock itself: “Everybody hides the truth, the [tender] documents (los pliegos), the contracts, they are never known, they are State secrets,” Ramón complained to me, “This information should be public, but it is not public. So, it is a mystery (una incógnita).”

If the arrival of new rolling stock from China was meant to signal the advent of definitive (infrastructural) modernity, then, modernity was seen to be somewhat hollow. The foreignness of the new machinery, brought to the fore by automatic announcements that misrecognized names and locations and by the labor needed to render new rolling stock and existing infrastructure commensurable (through the excision of jutting parts and the raising of station platforms), raised specters over the loss of national sovereignty, as articulated in anxieties over financial and technological dependency and the increased redundancy of workers. While modernization appeared in official discourse and propaganda as a proximate, attainable reality, an endpoint, in practice modernization was shown to be an ongoing project of work, aspiration, and striving. Modernization required constant tinkering and translation, and threatened to unmake and unravel (human and national sovereignty, for instance) as much as it promised to deliver. At the same time, and as can be gleaned from their comments above, commuters’ and railroad workers’ encounter with the particular form of infrastructural difference comprised by Chinese trains was informed by and reflective of deep-rooted xenophobia towards Chinese and Chinese-Argentines in Argentina (Ko 2016).12

3. The graveyard

In January 2014 I visited a place known as the “locomotive graveyard” (cementerio de locomotoras), which lies a few meters away from Liniers station, a bustling transit hub at the edges of the city of Buenos Aires. High brick walls mostly concealed the languishing locomotive repair workshop from the view of passersby. The muddy road that traversed the grounds wound around ramshackle warehouses long in disuse, their glass windows ragged. Discarded train seats lay piled high in the open, like exposed railway innards. Across, weeds had colonized a group of rusted train cars. British industrial-style brick buildings housed a motley assortment of diesel locomotives awaiting repair, so old that spare parts were no longer produced. In adjoining rooms, discarded tools lay in still-life

12Chisu Teresa Ko (2016) traces the representation of Asians and Asian-Argentines in academic and cultural discourse in Argentina, and shows how people of Chinese (and Korean) origin have been targets of racism and xenophobia. Estimated to be more than 100,000 people, the Chinese population is reportedly the largest Asian group and the fourth-largest immigrant group in Argentina, but it has received the least scholarly attention (Ko 2016, 272). Chinese immigration to Argentina is more recent than Japanese and Korean immigration, becoming more significant in the 1990s and 2000s and peaking during the post-crisis years. Asian-Argentines in general have been statistically invisibilized: there is no “Asian category” in the census, and there is no sustained official data, except for foreign-born Asians, which excludes locally-born Asians who might identify as Argentines (Ko 2016). “This practice,” Ko (2016, 272) writes, “at once reflects and reproduces the common attitude that Asians cannot be Argentines.” Ko also writes, “Public sentiment also reflects an assumption that people of Asian descent are physically, culturally, and linguistically too different to belong to Argentina or less prone to ‘become’ Argentine compared to other immigrant groups” (2016, 269). Xenophobic accusations towards Chinese-Argentines, who traditionally work as grocers, include frequent accusations of mafia connections and unethical business practices (Ko 2016). Japanese immigrants, in contrast, have a longer history in the country and a more favorable image (Ko 2016). Differential perceptions of the Japanese and Chinese communities in Argentina might inform, if not explain, different valuations of CSR (Chinese) trains vis-à-vis the historic Toshiba (Japanese) trains by train commuters and railroad workers. For an example of commonplace racist portrayals of Asians and Asian-Argentines prevalent in the media, see conservative newspaper La Nación’s sketch of the daily life of Chinese technicians (Mac Mullen 2015).
arrangements, and stray dogs took refuge. The prevalence of dust and rust lent the air an uncanny sheen. Signs of the railway revolution were scarce, barely punctuating the landscape with the allure of change: here a billboard announcing the imminent renovation of workshop floors and ceilings, there a truck carrying new concrete crossties. Most conspicuously, a brand-new locomotive, purchased from China and bearing an inscription commemorating the 200th anniversary of Argentine struggles for independence, lay out in the open (Figure 3). A handful of policemen sharing an asado (barbecue) on old train seats kept a watchful eye on the locomotive, looking to preserve this centerpiece of the revolution from vandalism and graffiti.

My guide was Marco, a young electromechanical technician sent by Claudio, the workshop manager (jefe de taller) and my research contact, to pick me up at Liniers station, where I had arrived by train. Marco laughs when I tell him I had planned on walking to the workshop grounds by myself. "Esto es un asco" ("This is disgusting"), he says, waving at the surrounding neighborhood. As we drive towards the main building, we pass the remains of burnt railway cars. Marco shows me around the nave principal, the main workshop room, pointing out the different locomotives awaiting repair: General Motors, ALCO, Gaia. Some of these have long been abandoned by the rest of the world, and spare parts can often only be found in India. It is lunchtime, and there are no workers in sight. There used to be 1,200 workers employed here, Marco tells me, but now there are only 43, or 46 if you count the jefes, supervisors. There are stray dogs in one shed, Playboy posters in another. I am overwhelmed by the mounds of scrap metal, by the rust and dust, the

Figure 3. “Chinese” locomotive awaiting repair. January 2014. Photo by author.
materiality of desidia (neglect) and decay. It seems unlikely that these machines will ever run again.

At Claudio’s behest, Marco drops me off at a makeshift office, a prefab unit over to a side. There I meet the two workshop supervisors, David and Tomás, both of whom work under Claudio and who look to be in their fifties. David has been working in the railways for 38 years, Tomás for 26. Both come from a cuna ferroviaria (a railway cradle, i.e. a railway family) and, like Claudio, had been recruited from the Roca line’s workshops, as supervisors were lacking in the Sarmiento.

We sit in the tiny office, the two men smoking one cigarette after another. I ask them about the railway system, its current state and the proposed modernization projects. “The railway itself is very deteriorated,” David says, “In every regard, every regard.” He describes the “disastrous” state of tracks, the aging rolling stock (the newest diesel locomotive in service in the Sarmiento line is a 1967 model, he says), the lack of spare parts, the sluggish bureaucratic procedure to import them from abroad. The degree of deterioration of locomotives often demands as much as a year of work to repair. “Here, everything is done by dropper (a cuentagotas). You do a small thing one day, you leave it, fifteen days later you start to do something else, you leave it, because there is no budget and there are no materials. And you are … sewing a suit poorly (cosiendo mal un traje), you see,” Tomás explains. “You do not even have the guidance of a work structure, because there is no one above you telling you what to do. Here we are on our own, conducting ourselves,” David added.

The men are skeptical about the government’s modernization projects, which, they say, are largely focused on the metropolitan area. They criticize the government’s lack of a long-term project, a lack of imagination for railways otherwise. Yet, in their telling, the so-called revolution is threatened not only by shortsightedness, but by the public’s own disregard for trains’ physical integrity. Tomás proffers an illustration: the new Chinese trains were covered in graffiti even before they entered into service. “The new locomotives might work four, five years,” David remarks, “But then they will begin to …” “To fail! Like all fierro [metals/machinery],” Tomás exclaimed, “You have to maintain it.” But, although, new rolling stock had already begun to trickle in from China, and to break down, David, Tomás, and other workshop employees had yet to receive training on how to repair these new machines. “They sent people to China to take the course, in China,” David tells me, “As an experience, the trip was extraordinary. Extraordinary. But they did not learn.” “The Chinese came here,” David continues, offering an imaginary exchange between an Argentine technician and his Chinese counterpart, “What is this?” ‘I do not know. I do not know.’” Tomás resumes the imaginary conversation: “Why did this break?” ‘It broke. We replace it and that is it,’” his imaginary Chinese interlocutor responds. The translator, a woman, was herself not a technician, he says, and she had trouble with the vocabulary. “It was all improvised,” David complained.

David tells me another story, one I had heard a few months earlier from Claudio. Walter, a colleague of theirs who works at the Mitre line’s railway workshop in Victoria, had asked the Chinese technicians how the window panes could be replaced, as in the new locomotives they were fixed-pane, glued in place. “No, the windows are not to be replaced,” a Chinese man (un chino) had responded. “What do you mean, they are not replaced? And if they break?” Walter had insisted. “No, they will not break,” had been the response. David looks at me with incredulity. “In China they do not break!” he exclaims. In telling me
this story a few months prior, Claudio had underscored the need to replace trains’ window panes frequently in Argentina: “They shoot at it with a slingshot (gomerá), they throw anything they can at you. And the windows break!” David and Claudio etched similar racialized geographies of risk and cultural decay, locating slingshot throwers in the villa, the informal settlements where the poor (often viewed as nonwhite) live.13 “It is a game to them,” David told me of the slingshot throwers, “Our culture is already like that. How do you correct that?”

Yet according to David and Tomás it was not just passengers and villa residents who endangered the welfare of trains and their infrastructure: the supervisors also lamented the loss of railway culture, of a particular work ethic, a sentiment I had heard from other railway workers. They described workers’ habit of taking long breaks, their lack of respect for supervisors, their reticence to work. “How to change our mentality? How do you do it? It is impossible!” David said, shaking his head. “It is our culture, our culture.” The leading faction in the workers’ union in the Sarmiento line, a left-wing faction known as la Bordó, is partly to blame, in their eyes. “Historically, the Sarmiento was always leftist, this area above all,” David explained, “They do what they want, what they want.”14 A railroad worker, a man known among commuter activists and union members as La Bronca, The Anger, in allusion to his pseudonym on social media (“Everybody’s Anger, Railway Struggle,” La bronca de todos, lucha ferroviaria), where he exposes working and commuting conditions, would tell me a few months later: “The railroad worker was known as a solitary person. Today we have become the demon of society.”

After we converse a while, Tomás excuses himself to attend to some shop floor matters, and David offers to give me another tour of the main workshop. Lunch break is over, and shop floor workers have resumed their tasks. After walking among the rusted machinery, we step outside. David wants to show me “las máquinas chinas,” the Chinese machines (locomotives). We stop to look at new wagons, recently arrived from China, that have already derailed. “The thing is, even if they come, the tracks … the tracks are all broken,” David explains, hinting at the futility of new rolling stock on dilapidated infrastructure.15 We then pause to look at the locomotive, its undercarriage damaged (Figure 3). David tells me that his men cannot repair it yet: the locomotive is under warranty, and they must wait for Chinese technicians to come and tell them what to do. In any case, the necessary spare parts have yet to arrive. “If they had asked us, I would

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13On racialized geographies of Argentina, see Ratier (1971) and Alberto and Elena (2016), especially Elena (2016) and Gordillo (2016).

14Members of la Bordó, in contrast, take pride in the claim that it was their faction that opposed the concessioning of the railroad network in the 1990s most actively. Longtime leader of la Bordó Rubén “Pollo” Sobrero, furthermore, had predicted the Once tragedy. In December 2004, a few blocks away from the Sarmiento’s Once de Septiembre terminal station, a fire in the discotheque known as República Cromañón, and the ensuing stampede, claimed 194 lives. Cromañón, the discotheque and the event, became a symbol of corruption, insofar as it exposed the faulty infrastructure of the premises and the oversight of city officials, in particular public venue auditors (see Zenobi 2012). Pollo Sobrero, no stranger to the limelight, took to appearing on television and radio to warn that there would be a “Cromañón ferroviario,” a railroad version of the Cromañón tragedy.

15Track infrastructure was indeed being upgraded under the Ministry of the Interior and Transportation’s railway modernization project. Yet modernization had different valences in different places: while some branches underwent “renovation” (renovación), that is, replacement of entire sections of track (new sections readily identifiable due to the concrete crossties that replaced wooden ones), others simply underwent “improvement” (mejoramiento), a more superficial betterment (for instance, through the addition of ballast). On their “diagnostic trips” to audit railway infrastructure, members of the commuter group Autoconvocados X los Trenes (“Self-Rallied for Trains”) would take note of what, exactly, was being upgraded, as some branches announced as being “renovated” were in fact only being “improved.”
have told them, ‘Look, you should better buy the spare parts before bringing the railway cars,’” he says.

David tells me that these Chinese locomotives have “sensors everywhere.”

Of course, in China they are used to the fact that you sit in a train and you can sleep on a long journey. Here you wake up. It is the other way around (Es al revés). You put a glass of water on one of those tables inside the train cars, and the water does not move. Here you cannot put anything!

He added, “So, they have sensors everywhere, and here these locomotives will not work, as much as they would like them to.”

The locomotive graveyard, with its rusting machinery, vacant buildings, and dwindling workforce, indeed seemed at odds with the so-called railroad revolution. According to my workshop guides, modernization efforts were threatened not only by unrelenting infrastructural decay, but also by cultural and moral decline. David and Claudio’s story about railway blight – about the jagged ruination of rolling stock wrought by improper passenger behavior – echoed similar views proffered by other railroad workers, commuters, and rail enthusiasts. “Argentines do not know how to look after their things,” Dario, a commuter and rail fan, told me during a diagnostic trip organized by the commuter-activist group Autoconvocados X los Trenes (“Self-Rallied for Trains”). Hernán, who used to work in the Sarmiento line’s administrative offices, located in Once station, before he was rendered disposable by the concessioning process, similarly declared that “People are harmful,” citing passengers’ habit of littering the tracks.

In tandem with the modernization of railway infrastructure and rolling stock, in fact, the Ministry of the Interior and Transportation embarked on a media campaign to reeducate the traveling public. New signs popped up in railway stations, exhorting passengers to purchase train tickets: “Tu boleto se ve en obras,” “Your ticket is seen in works,” the signs proclaimed. This purported transmutation of (low-cost, heavily-subsidized) train tickets into infrastructural improvements signaled the end of the de facto truce that had enabled passengers to ride ticket-free, in silent recognition of the decrepit state of the railway services. These signs appeared to shift the cost of modernization onto passengers. Other signs read, “El tren es tuyo, cuidalo” (“The train is yours, take care of it”). Elda, a passenger and informal leader of Autoconvocados X los Trenes, was quick to reframe the public nature of the railway, retorting on social media and in group meetings: “El tren es nuestro, cuidenlo” (“The train is ours, [you] take care of it”) (Figure 4).

4. Conclusion: progress … derailed?

Argentina’s “railroad revolution” offers a prime vantage point from which to interrogate the frail nature of modernity. In the fraught aftermath of the Tragedia de Once, the much-anticipated arrival of new rolling stock from China to Buenos Aires revealed the blundering limits of modernization: the misrecognitions and infrastructural mismatches, the carryovers of renewal. Beyond the glitches that pointed to the awkward translations at play when technology travels from one context to another (Von Schnitzler 2013), the infrastructural modernity heralded by new trains seemed not only suspect and incomplete, but also costly (as revealed by my interlocutors’ anxieties around the technological dependence that might shackle Argentina to China).
The patchy renewal of railroad infrastructure in Argentina seems to underscore that modernity is always in-progress, that modernization does not arrive and take hold once and for all. It sheds light on how modernization keeps arriving, not getting fully installed, and then arriving again. It illustrates, too, how the technologies and infrastructures that underpin modernity are entangled in messy relationships and shaped by unruly material histories. The derailed Chinese locomotive from the train graveyard is perhaps an apt image: incongruous amidst the dust, rust, and weeds, the shiny locomotive appeared to taunt the revolution, having derailed on its maiden trip due to the dilapidated state of tracks. The rhythm of decay, it seemed to say, outstrips the pace of progress. Progress is always belated, and has already derailed.

Yet for all its failed promises, progress is also fervently reclaimed and laboriously upheld. Many commuters and railroad workers had strong affective investments in the project of modernization and wanted to believe that the arrival of new rolling stock and the renovation of infrastructure, however piecemeal, would translate into better and safer commuting conditions. For many commuters, it did, and statistics collected by the Comisión Nacional de Regulación del Transporte (the National Commission for the Regulation of Transport, CNRT for short) indicate ridership, as measured by the number of train tickets sold, is increasing across the different commuter lines (CNRT 2018). If anything, improvements in quality of service might point to the power of collective protests and struggles against railway decay and their ability to influence state policy.

Figure 4. A screen in Retiro station (Mitre Line) reads, “The train is yours, take care of it.” March 2014. Photo by author.
The derailed Chinese locomotive thus appears not so much as a cautionary tale about progress itself and the impossibility of the project of modernization, but rather as an important reminder of the relevance of material histories – a significant corrective given decades of dwindling maintenance in Argentina’s rail network. The derailed brand-new locomotive is as much an apt image for the railroad revolution as are the creative ways in which workers assemble local and foreign parts to make trains move, commuter-activists audit infrastructure, and ferroaficionados (train enthusiasts) repair abandoned train stations. In the face of state-led modernization, affective engagements with and political mobilization around trains and their infrastructure reclaim railroads as a public service, and in the process contribute to redefine what “public” can mean.

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