

***‘Spain is Still Different’;*  
Biotechnology and Culture in Contemporary Spain**

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They are everywhere—fleshy bodies, garbage, microbes, computers, texts, clouds, pesticides—and nowhere, taken for granted in the multiplicity of their everyday existence by a pervasive anthropocentric gaze that treats “society” as exclusively human. Yet, as intellectual developments in Science and Technology Studies (STS), such as Actor-Network Theory (Latour, *Reassembling the Social*), suggest, they constitute what it means to be human. According to Bennett, they are not only resources that humans manipulate, but also “vibrant matter” with the capacity to impede or enable humans, and to act as quasi-agents with lives of their own. Indeed, their exclusion from consideration in human affairs, even as they proliferate as nature-culture hybrids amidst us, can be seen to be a crucial factor enabling technological exploitation, and the dominance as well as the crises, of modern human civilization (Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*). While STS is part of the intellectual developments inspiring “the nonhuman turn” (Grusin) in the humanities (Wolfe) and in sociology (reviewed in Cerulo), questions regarding nonhumans and technoscientific knowledge continue to stimulate much debate within STS (e.g., Sayes). Genetic modification of crops is a question where science, society, and culture meet and fuse giving birth to new forms of life. These forms of life, both vegetable and animal, are frequently destined to be human food, a matter that humans relate to intimately as it literally forms part of our flesh. Debates on GMOs can be thus seen as debates on synergies between culture, politics, and science or, in other terms, on encounters between human and non-human realms, where culture and politics condition scientific research and policies on adoption of its inventions, which in turn transform society, its culture, and the individual human bodies.

In our co-written essay in *Ethics of Life: Contemporary Iberian Debates* entitled “Still Different? Biotechnology, Politics and Culture in Spain,” we focus on how Spain’s enthusiastic embrace of GM crops among European

countries can be explained as a result of Spanish history and culture, paradoxically, a consequence of the past dominance of anti-science discourses. While those anti-science discourses became connected with ‘difference’ in defining Spanish national identity, like Miguel Unamuno’s famous “Que inventen otros!” (Let others invent!) from the article “Sobre Europeización” (On Europeization), pro-science attitudes were automatically thought of as pro-Europe. PSOE’s platform, where Spain was defined as “everything under the sun” and that moved Spain close to Europe, in its enthusiasm towards the cutting-edge scientific field of biotechnology, opened Spain to genetically modified organisms. This, however, happened at the time when most European countries developed different policies towards GMOs, based on the principle of precaution. As a result, Spanish politicians, by wanting to be more European, became less so, once again making Spain into an exception in terms of its approach to techno-scientific innovations. The idea that “Spain is still different,” now in terms of its socio-political attitudes towards GMOs, appeared in Jorge Riechmann’s book on transgenic organisms, *Qué son los transgénicos? (What are GMOs?)*. In our essay, we depart from this idea to examine the ways that the proverbial Spanish difference in fact conditioned Spanish policies that turned Spain into the largest grower of GM grains in Europe. We argue that the political and institutional legacies of successive authoritarian regimes have shaped the development of a political culture, which is subservient to the agendas and interests of those with political power, contributing to the subsequent lack of public debate and participation surrounding the commercialization of GM crops in Spain. In other words, Spain is no longer different in the way this difference was defined in oppositional terms to the rest of Western Europe—that is, in terms of the spiritual essence of Spanish civilization that was different from the technologically obsessed but spiritually inferior “West.” However, Spain may still be different, in a more fundamental sense of a political culture that is subservient to regimes of power. The regimes of power have shifted, they are no longer connected to authoritarian monarchy or dictatorship allied with Catholic Church, but rather to globalized multinational interests. The authority is constructed by the expertise of scientists co-shaping a neoliberal bioeconomy and the scientized regulations that they help to create. In attempting to erase its marks of otherness in relation to “the West,” Spain may have ironically ended up repeating the same pattern of relationships between political authorities and civil society. In the process, transnational and local interests are coproduced with the nation-building interests of governmental actors such that the development of the biotechnology goes hand in hand with the development of the nation-state in the form of the bioeconomy.

In our future work, we are planning to explore the other side of human/non-human synergistic economies, looking at the changes that GM

crops impose in social life, forming new cultures of dominance and resistance, transforming discourses about city/country binary as well as discourses about food and health. Since we sent our essays to *Hispanic Issues*, *The New York Times* has published an article by Andrew Pollack, entitled “Weed Killer, Long Cleared is Doubted,” suggesting that Monsanto’s herbicide Roundup, created and used widely for the last twenty years to protect GM soy from pests, may cause cancer. This news has not come as a surprise for Argentineans and Paraguayans surrounded by GM soy plantations who have reported growing rates of cancer and birth defects among children and adults for years. Our next essay will explore how GM corn, as a human/non-human hybrid in service of transnational economies, is in its turn transforming human lives in particular locations. Since some of the key actors in the unfolding transnational and national bioeconomies are not only human, we would like to envision this story of nature-cultural transformations also from the point of view of the non-human agents, through the history and lives of transgenic plants themselves.

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Suryanarayanan, Sainath and Katarzyna Beilin. “‘Spain is Still Different’; Biotechnology and Culture in Contemporary Spain.” *A Polemical Companion to Ethics of Life: Contemporary Iberian Debates*. Ed. Katarzyna Beilin and William Viestenz. *Hispanic Issues On Line Debates* 7 (2016): 27–29. Web.

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