

Book Worlds as a Window to Analyze the Extreme Right Wing in Argentina

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Résumé de l'article

Dans le présent article, nous examinons la manière dont certains livres et auteurs contemporains ont contribué à la formation d'une option politique d'extrême droite en Argentine. Notre attention se porte plus précisément sur Nicolás Márquez et Agustín Laje, deux auteurs à la visibilité sans précédent, comme en témoignent la distribution et les ventes de leurs livres, leur nombre d'abonnés sur les réseaux sociaux, et le succès remporté par les événements et les colloques qui leur sont consacrés. En 2016, la parution de *El libro negro de la nueva izquierda. Ideología de género o subversión cultural* [Le livre noir de la nouvelle gauche. Idéologie du genre ou subversion culturelle] a conféré à ces auteurs un statut d'« autorités » au sein de la droite, et des communautés de jeunes lecteurs se sont formées dans le sillage du circuit promotionnel de l'ouvrage. Par notre participation à divers événements et des entretiens approfondis menés avec des jeunes lecteurs, nous explorons les formes de sociabilité et de subjectivation politique auxquelles donnent lieu Márquez, Laje et *El libro negro de la nueva izquierda* dans le contexte de la circulation des idées de droite en Argentine.

BOOK WORLDS AS A WINDOW TO ANALYZE THE EXTREME RIGHT WING IN ARGENTINA

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines how certain contemporary books and authors contributed to the formation of an extreme right political option in Argentina. The paper focuses on Nicolás Márquez and Agustín Laje, two authors who have achieved unprecedented visibility, which is reflected in the circulation and sales of their books, in the number of their followers on social networks, and in the magnitude of their events and conferences. In 2016, the publication of *El libro negro de la nueva izquierda. Ideología de género o subversión cultural* [*The Black Book of the New Left: Gender Ideology or Cultural Subversion*] established both authors as figures with “authority” in right-wing culture, and enabled the formation of communities of young readers from the promotional circuit of the work. Having attended different events and conducted a series of in-depth interviews with young readers, we explore the forms of sociability and political subjectivation enabled by these authors and this book in the space of circulation of right-wing ideas in Argentina today.

RÉSUMÉ

Les jeunes lecteurs et la politique : le monde du livre comme fenêtre d’analyse de l’extrême droite en Argentine

Dans le présent article, nous examinons la manière dont certains livres et auteurs contemporains ont contribué à la formation d’une option politique d’extrême droite en Argentine. Notre attention se porte plus précisément sur Nicolás Márquez et Agustín Laje, deux auteurs à la visibilité sans précédent, comme en témoignent la distribution et les ventes de leurs livres, leur nombre d’abonnés sur les réseaux sociaux, et le succès remporté par les événements et les colloques qui leur sont consacrés. En 2016, la parution de *El libro negro de la nueva izquierda. Ideología de género o subversión cultural* [Le livre noir de la nouvelle gauche. Idéologie du genre ou subversion culturelle] a conféré à ces auteurs un statut d’« autorités » au sein de la

droite, et des communautés de jeunes lecteurs se sont formées dans le sillage du circuit promotionnel de l'ouvrage. Par notre participation à divers événements et des entretiens approfondis menés avec des jeunes lecteurs, nous explorons les formes de sociabilité et de subjectivation politique auxquelles donnent lieu Márquez, Laje et *El libro negro de la nueva izquierda* dans le contexte de la circulation des idées de droite en Argentine.

Keywords

Extreme right, Argentina, intellectuals, publishing, readers

Mots-clés

Extrême droite, Argentine, intellectuels, édition, lecteurs

In recent years, different analysts have referred to Argentina as an “exceptional case” since the extreme right wing does not have the same gravitational pull as in other Latin American countries. The prevailing explanation for this “exception” both within and outside academia is that the importance of Peronism and the centre right wing act together as political forces that form a “cordon sanitaire” against the advance of the extreme right wing.¹ However, the triumph of Javier Milei in the 2023 elections meant for the first time the accession of a far-right politician to the position of president, forcing this assumption to be revised.²

This article does not intend to explain how the electoral success of the extreme right in Argentina was possible, but it does have the goal of making visible one of the phenomena that provided the conditions of possibility for its emergence: the circulation of right-wing authors and books and their ability to build a community of young readers through the dissemination of ideas.

In Argentina, the different actors and political spaces associated with the right have historically been reluctant to identify themselves with this ideological label.³ Some officials of the government of *Cambiamos* [Let's Change]—the centre-right coalition that governed the country between 2015 and 2019— even postulated the need to overcome the “left / right” binary because they understood that these were outdated and unproductive categories to interpret the dynamics of Argentine politics.⁴ However, since 2016 the interventions of intellectuals proposing to rescue the category “right” from its abjection, and to lay the cultural foundations to cement a political option that would openly define itself in those terms, began to gain

visibility. These agents have contributed to the production of views about national [Argentinian] politics, gender politics, interpretations of the repression unleashed by past dictatorial regimes, and the interpretation of recent history, among other topics, through books, articles, TV shows, social media posts, and events.

In this article we focus on Argentine authors Nicolás Márquez and Agustín Laje, who have achieved a visibility unprecedented for such figures, as reflected in the circulation and sales of their books—particularly *El libro negro de la nueva izquierda. Ideología de género o subversión cultural* [*The Black Book of the New Left: Gender Ideology or Cultural Subversion*] (Unión, 2016)—and the scale of their events and public appearances. The aforementioned book, a best-seller published by the small publishing house Unión, has sold about 20.000 copies—a high number for the standards of book sales in Argentina—and it occupied the first position of the Amazon Sales Rank of Spanish-language books on politics. The book is aimed at battling “cultural Marxism” and “the gender ideology,” in line with the heterogeneous right-wing culture that has emerged in the Latin American region, which has some common axes such as the rejection of the State and the idea of “social justice,” historical revisionism of political violence in the 1970s, and a strong opposition to the legalization of abortion and other forms of “cultural progressivism.”⁵

The authors of *El libro negro* are embedded into cultural production spaces (publishing houses and social media), as well as transnational institutions (liberal or libertarian foundations and think tanks), which guarantee their circulation. Laje and Márquez have gone on successful tours around Argentina, Mexico, Paraguay, Costa Rica, the Dominican Republic, Peru, and Spain, among other countries, which have enabled them to circulate their ideas and books internationally as well as to achieve media visibility.⁶ We posit that the communication circuit that produces and reproduces their discourse (publishers, intermediaries, peers and other media figures, readers, and the authors’ audience) holds up the books as objects to distribute thus allowing their authors to become academic, cultural, and political personalities with “authority” on the subject.⁷ On top of this, they create and strengthen a community of young readers who buy and read these books, and use them as an ideological foundation and as a way to cement their beliefs, feelings, and political opinions.

In terms of our methodology, we conducted different participant observation practices at book launching events of ultra-right intellectuals in Argentina from 2018 to the present. In addition to observing the interactions and profiles of those attending these events, we held informal conversations with dozens of readers as they waited to hear their referents. In this article we focus on a particular event that took place in March 2019 at the Belgrano auditorium, where Agustín Laje, Nicolás Márquez, and Javier Milei exposed their ideas in front of an audience of a thousand people. Several referents of the Argentine ultra-right understand the event as a turning point from which the project of building a competitive right-wing option was launched. Semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted with young readers and followers of Agustín Laje and Nicolás Márquez. The first contact with the interviewees was established at events and book presentations that we attended as listeners. Many of the young people were enthusiastic about the possibility of being able to talk about their opinions and political preferences, which facilitated the research tasks and expansion of the corpus of interviews. The analysis presented here, in addition to relying on participant observation practices, is based on the material provided by three interviews in particular, which reveal specific ways in which young people relate to right-wing books and authors.

Deviating from the approach that considers the Right from a perspective purely based on political party boundaries, this paper focuses on the weight of books as cultural artifacts that hold symbolic value and contribute to the construction of socialization spaces within the Right. In general terms, this perspective can illuminate substantive aspects about the growth of these ideological-political spaces at the national, regional, and global levels, as well as provide conceptual clues to understand the attractiveness they hold for youth groups. Secondly, this paper examines the link between the Right, culture, and books in the current juncture; third, it delves into book launches as fertile ground for the germination of networks, social ties, and the articulation of political alliances. Finally, it analyses the discourse and practices of three young readers of *El libro negro de la nueva izquierda* in connection with their incursions into right-wing literature, their political worldviews, and the social ties forged within these emergent environments.

Review of Literature

In Argentina, the field of the Right has been studied in terms of its ideology and its doctrine,⁸ using a comparative approach and focusing on its forms of collective organization.⁹ In dialogue with these historiographical works, most of which focus on the twentieth century, in the past few years there has emerged new literature on the “new Right” that takes a sociological or anthropological approach. These focus on the upper class’s education circuits;¹⁰ on the corporate background of government officials;¹¹ on the avenues through which political coalitions recruit managers, enabling them to attain political power;¹² and on the forms of youth activism.¹³

Given that this is a recent phenomenon, there is a lack of studies that explore the formation of right-wing spaces that do not identify with the party coalition that was in power in Argentina from 2015 to 2019, *Cambiamos*. Even though the political segments linked to intellectuals that we study here so far have scarce electoral reach, their configurations are in tune with the increase of “authoritarian sensibilities,”¹⁴ both on the regional level and in North America and Europe, as well as with the progressive articulation of transnational networks where intellectuals, experts, think tanks, and religious movements all participate.

In order to explore this space and this historical moment, we position ourselves from studies on the links between politics and culture, specifically regarding the role of the publishing sector and the agents linked to the production and circulation of books. According to the Argentinean anthropologist Gustavo Sorá, the links between publishing and politics manifest themselves in two ways, one “synchronic” and other “diachronic.”¹⁵ The first one occurs when a publishing group or politician releases an ensemble of ideas motivated by some interests and under a set of explicit conditions that reflect their commitments to a larger project. The second one refers to the impact that printed copies can have on the public sphere in the medium and long terms. The book is a cultural good that can provide valuable resources for the interpretation of reality, so it can display a political efficacy to the extent that it positions itself as a vortex of ideas and sensibilities.

While the link between print media and left-wing culture has been studied from this point of view,¹⁶ its convergence with the Right's sociability spaces is yet an unexplored area in Argentina, despite the weight afforded to printed media that participate in these circles. The material perspective of book studies can be complemented with an analytical approach that studies the meaning and practices of the agents who are linked to the books. Public events and book presentations are relevant spaces for understanding the meanings that readers associate with the books they buy, read, and discuss.¹⁷ In these sociability spaces, as we will see next, culture flows not only as a medium but also as content—that is to say, as a layer of the arguments used to harness, persuade, and generate adherence to their ranks.¹⁸

In his ethnographic study of young far-right extremists in Berlin, Nitzán Shoshan registered that social conflict in Germany and Central Europe tended to be processed in cultural terms rather than as class confrontations.¹⁹ As counterpart to the latent deindustrialization, a defence of the nation flourished in some nooks and corners of Berlin as an “identity niche.” An active opposition to the state-sanctioned promotion of diversity and to “neoliberal multiculturalism” emerged for many youths as a catalyst for the social and economic difficulties they underwent on a daily basis. Thus positioning culture and its artifacts as the main *locus* of confrontation in the everyday life of youths, Shoshan's work illuminates certain aspects of our study subject in Argentina, where the culturalization of conflicts has also tinted the opposition between the Left and the Right.

Books and Right-Wing Culture in the Current Context

For the last few years, intellectual, publishing, and political figures of the vernacular Right have chosen events, roundtables, and book launches as their favoured settings to broadcast their ideas to massive audiences comprising older and younger generations. The central theme of these talks and books stems, in effect, from a resignification of the Gramscian concept of “culture war” to oppose everything that they identify as “(cultural) Marxism” and “gender ideology,” both elements which they consider indicative of the dominant “left-wing culture.” Moreover, in many cases the entry of youths into these spaces was not motivated by economic causes—though this is a

variable that must be taken into account—but rather by cultural factors, such as their rejection of the legalization of abortion.²⁰

In this context, books act as key instruments to wage the cultural “war” wielding “arguments,” but also as symbolic goods which allow right-wing personalities to build up and develop their profile. Two men who have gained notoriety and who illustrate this tendency are Nicolás Márquez (born in Mar del Plata, Argentina, 1975) and Agustín Laje (born in Córdoba, Argentina, 1989). An adherent of Catholic conservative ideology, Márquez graduated as a lawyer and, in 2004, published his first book, *La otra parte de la verdad* [*The Other Part of the Truth*] (Self-published, 2004; Contracultura, 2012), where he expounds his interpretation of the Argentinian dictatorship of 1976-1983,²¹ a revisionist perspective that aims to “reveal” truths about recent history that contradict the “official” narrative.²² This book, along with *La mentira oficial: el setentismo como política de Estado* [*The Official Lie: “Seventies Spirit” as State Solicy*] (Self-published, 2006), designated him as an obligatory reference for “complete memory”²³ activists and for members of organizations that defend the rights of agents who inflicted crimes against humanity during the dictatorship.

Laje, on the other hand, is a political scientist graduated from Universidad Católica de Córdoba, who presides over the libertarian *Fundación Libre* [Freedom Foundation], has authored *Los mitos setentistas: mentiras fundamentales de la década del 70* [*Myths about the seventies: the fundamental lies about the 1970s*] (Self-published, 2011; Unión, 2012), and, much like the think tank he presides, falls mostly under a liberal ideology²⁴—specifically, the philosophical and political current linked to Paleolibertarianism.²⁵

While their earlier printings were funded by the authors themselves, they soon managed to get small right-wing publishers to print them, such as Contracultura and Unión.²⁶ Both authors first ventured into the publishing world with the topic of the last Argentinian dictatorial regime. Their books were in line with a broader tendency that originated in 2003 and gained momentum in the following years: an interest displayed by big publishers in 1970s national history and a boom in the sales of books pertaining to this topic.²⁷

The symbolic capital these authors amassed through mediating figures—prologue writers, editors, reviewers, politicians, intellectuals—the circulation circles that promoted them, and the publishing success they enjoyed, all contributed to configure their presence in the public sphere. In 2016, Laje and Márquez released the aforementioned *The Black Book of the New Left* through the publisher Unión. This book is an ideological successor to the pre-existing literature dedicated to this historical period, but it also surpasses it, as it aimed to have an impact on the political scene and on wider thematic fields with issues such as gender equality, abortion, and the “ideologies” they consider to be a product of these, such as feminism and “homosexualism,” in the words of the authors.²⁸ It has two sections: the first part, “Post-Marxism and radical feminism,” is signed by Laje; the second part, “Cultural homosexualism,” by Márquez. This book not only legitimized its authors as writers, intellectuals, and influencers within the far right sphere (with over 20,000 copies sold, according to data provided by the publisher), it also engendered a readership that attends events and various launches and presentations of the publication to hear the authors speak in person.

Book Launches, Young Readers and Right-Wing Culture

Just as Laje and Márquez gathered a vast and active following in social media, *The Black Book* established itself as an efficient symbolic artefact to build social ties. The book prompted the face-to-face meeting of its readers and enabled a “renewal” of the political culture of the Right through the recourse of humour and controversy on the level of discourse, and on a material level by generating concrete sociability spaces such as presentations and conferences. Our paper’s thesis is that it was not a matter of renewing the political Right *with* the book (which would require an analysis of the book’s contents) but rather *through* the book, capitalizing the opportunities generated by it to multiply social relations and consolidate a political community. As Besoky states, the reproduction of political cultures requires not only canonical texts and ideological foundations, but also the “performance of iterative practices, the repetition of rituals and ceremonies and the participation in events and demonstrations which serve to seal the commitment of the members and to confirm the sense of belonging to a group.”²⁹

In the course of the fieldwork conducted for the research project this paper is part of, we attended two conferences which presented Laje and Márquez as main speakers. The first, “A Conversation in Anticipation of the 2019 Elections,” took place in December 2018 in the Club Español, and the second, “New Attacks on Freedom,” was held in March 2019 in the Belgrano auditorium, both in the City of Buenos Aires. While the first conference was a free activity and had a more limited promotion and attendance (almost 400), access to the second was paid. This last event replicated the TEDx talk format, and took place in an auditorium with the capacity for approximately a thousand attendees.

These events can be conceived as ritual performances, wherein politics are symbolically built and there circulate multiple meanings which can be accessed through an ethnographic perspective.³⁰ In these public talks and conferences, the authors position themselves as such by highlighting and referring back to their publications, orienting the reading of their work to conform to their own interpretations, and interacting with their readers. In combination with Laje and Márquez’ social media presence, their book acted as a necessary condition for the celebration of both events, by cultivating a readership with the potential to get politically involved and to be moulded into an attending audience. In fact, in relation to the book, the same ritual could be observed around the closing time of each event: expectant youths who had turned up with their copy of the book stood in line to get a signature from the authors. Near the table reserved for the authors’ signings, there was a book stand set up by the publisher, Unión, where *The Black Book* and others could be found side by side with stationery items engraved with the book cover and other images mocking progressive and left-wing sectors.

Without falling into the folly of conceiving of these spaces, with their dynamics, logics, and political practices, as a mechanical result of the publishing phenomenon, we consider the “book effect” in its capacity to build up figures with “authority,”³¹ to engender networks of social relationships and to coordinate political allegiances and interests. During the event at the Belgrano auditorium, Marquez referred to the French anti-semitic thinker Charles Maurras to promote a pragmatic articulation among the forces that historically characterized the Argentine right wing with the aim of “defending our Christian cultural tradition.”³² The cases of Vox in Spain, the Northern

League in Italy, and the National Grouping in France were taken as a horizon for Márquez, who expressed the hope of seeing in Argentina a political party in which the different right-wing tendencies existing in the country would converge. Taking into account that one of the main features of political cultures is their osmosis and permeability,³³ we find it significant that in the Belgrano auditorium event, Márquez stated he has hopes of seeing “liberals who believe that life begins at conception, conservatives who believe that tradition has to be in the service of progress, and nationalists who don’t mistake love for their country for love for the State.” The tone of this intervention positioned the authors not only as producers of ideas but also as “political armors” that influence and promote the formation of alliances in the sphere of political-partisan disputes.

In terms of their readers or audience, these comprise a diverse social group that could not be outlined homogeneously in terms of class trajectories, socio-educational levels, or cultural indicators. At the event that took place on March 14, 2019 in the Belgrano district, we could observe diverse profiles in the line that formed along Cabildo Avenue for entry into the auditorium: young attendees in their 20s who identify as “liberal” or “libertarian,” young people wearing heavy metal band or anime t-shirts, Catholic and Christian teenage groups with the light blue neckerchief used to signify the “let’s save both lives” anti-abortion movement in Argentina, and other youth subcultures. While many of the followers of Laje and Márquez react aggressively on social media whenever anyone levels any criticism or ridicule their way, they show up to these events with a very different attitude: cheerful, enthusiastic, willing to have conversations amongst themselves and get to know each other, eager to listen to the people they look up to.

As to the authors, we can appreciate another form of contrast. Even though their social media presence and mass media appearances are characterized by their use of “hate speech,”³⁴ in the context of these events such virulence is accompanied by a prescriptive directive that urges listeners to adhere to a spirit of “tolerance” of the big ideological views that converge to form the Argentinian Right: liberalism, conservatism, and nationalism.

Although political cultures can be comprehended through the map of ideological representations that integrate them, they can also be approached as “practices embodied in the trajectories of their adherents.”³⁵ In line with this perspective, after carrying out the non-participant observation in the aforementioned events, we held conversations with ten young supporters of these authors towards the end of the conference in Club Español. In addition to this, in the following months we conducted semi-structured in-depth interviews with three of them: Santiago (24 years old), Joaquín (26), and Pamela (33).³⁶ Each one of them expressed a different political leaning within the Right, though they all conveyed an acceptance of the other traditions. In the process through which the political culture of the Right is revitalized, books appear to fulfill several functions: they present readers with arguments to wage their “cultural war,” they materialize and give shape to thoughts “they already had,” and they afford identification among peers. The selection of interviewees was based on qualitative criteria defined in accordance with the objectives of our research project. In addition to the requirement that they participate in spaces and events for the new Argentinian alt-right, it was paramount that the interviewees had a connection to book culture. We included profiles of diverse readers, which, despite not exhausting the heterogeneity of the extensive universe of young people who subscribe to these traditions, prove useful in establishing similarities and counterpoints, as well as to strengthen the analysis.

The interviewees disclose different relationships with and different ways of appropriating the books, which distinguish them from the figure of the mere passive “recipient.” Books allow readers to interact with them in various ways, through practices which go beyond the intentions of their authors. There are no “right” or “wrong” readings of books, but rather it is through the way they are produced, circulated, and consumed that we can reach an understanding of what, how, and why the book was read. The text does not exist as a “thing-in-itself,” but is always read in specific ways grounded in particular historical and social contexts: “the text does not exist outside the history of its interpretations... Between the reader and the text there necessarily stands a whole mesh of previous interpretations. Each text has accumulated a history of effects and interpretations that form a constituent part of its meaning for us. The text is the history of the text, the history of its readings.”³⁷

Books for the Counter-Reaction

A counter-reaction has awoken. In terms of the French Revolution, we are the counterrevolutionaries, here to put a stop to it. People who have never mobilized in their lives have woken up. A fiber so intimate has been touched, values so deeply-rooted, that they go out into the streets because they can't take it anymore.

Santiago is 24 years old, and this is how he describes the current times as experienced by the Right. He follows Laje and Márquez to their conferences, on their social media, and as a reader of their books. His proclivity for religion and right-wing ideas seems to be an inheritance that skipped a generation: his paternal and maternal grandfathers served in the military and all his grandparents were Catholic, while his parents, on the other hand, are atheist and left-wing. As they were very young and both worked when he was born, Santiago spent part of his childhood with his grandparents, who he identifies as the ones who imparted his current beliefs and allegiances to him.

Santiago has identified as a “conservative liberal” from a young age: “My mum’s rebellion was to the Left. I’m always teased that my rebellion against my parents was to slide to the Right.” His copy of *The Black Book* is worn down by use, by his many readings of it and his notations. His copy has passed through the hands of a friend who shares his outlook and also through those of a professor at his university, to whom he lent it after a heated discussion during class about gender-based violence: “She is an adherent of the Radical party, a centre-leftist.³⁸ I told her : ‘take the book and read it.’ She gave it back to me with notations, so she must have read it.” He tells us that although his professor disagreed with what the book says, he was happy that she could read the arguments for his viewpoint and that they at least “fazed” her. Santiago follows Laje and Márquez because he believes that their voices seek to unite the entire spectrum of the Right, leaving aside the existing differences in order to “confront” the common enemy under better conditions. This was his personal experience, as he says, “they channeled everything I’d been doing disjointedly, put everything into one place.” He states with no hesitation that the enemy is “cultural Marxism”:

Laje says it very clearly and he explains it much better than me: it is the advance against the institutions that uphold the State: the family, the Church and the Armed Forces. Here, in the seventies, they tried to impose a socialist state and it didn't go well for them; now the Left is aiming more for a cultural approach, an economic approach.

Santiago has a small bookcase in the one-bedroom apartment he rents in the Barrio Norte, an upper-middle-class district in the City of Buenos Aires. There, he places his frequent book purchases. Though there is no discernible order at first glance, two main topics do stand out. On the one hand, religious books about Catholicism: different editions of the Bible, the *Confessions* of St Augustine, a book about the history of the popes, *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, and “The Strength of a Vocation” (an interview with Pope Francis), among many others. On the other hand, there are the books he defines as “about politics”—which are, however, mostly revisionist titles about the 1970s that deny the state terrorism that took place during those years, while condoning the military's actions: the two books written by the founder and president of the Center for Legal Studies on Terrorism and its Victims (CELTYV), Victoria Villarruel, *Los llaman... jóvenes idealistas* [*They Call Them... Young Idealists*] and *Los otros muertos* [*The Other Dead*], cowritten with Carlos Manfroni; as well as *Mentirás tus muertos* [*You Will Fabricate Your Dead*] by former military serviceman José D'Angelo. Santiago also has *Circo Kirchner* [*The Kirchner Circus*] by Laura Alonso, a political figure who was part of the coalition in power between 2015 and 2019; *La revolución del 55* [*The 1955 Revolution*] by lawyer Isidoro Ruiz Moreno; and political science classics such as Plato's *Republic*. His favourite bookshops are Catholic shops in the Barrio Norte district, such as San Pablo and Claretiana.

Santiago graduated from a public secondary school and decided to study Political Science in the Jesuitical Universidad del Salvador. He made a foray into a public institution, where he attended the Teacher Training Course in Legal Sciences for a year. He recalls it as a rough experience, because he failed a project where he based his arguments on books about the seventies that do not conform to the academic history of the recent past. In the opposition of views on reality, he considers academic history to be “biased” and the version his own books present to be “factual.” Much like Laje, he thinks that the

books he reads provide data, objective (and therefore incontestable) information:

I cite authors, I cite statistics. The books gave me the data: “A man dies every three hours,” the World Health Organization says as much. It provides you with arguments, it helps me guide my debates, because ideas can be discussed at length but data can’t be argued with, the dead are in the morgue, it’s crystal clear.

His life moves mostly through Catholic socialization spaces: he takes his university classes in the morning and his afternoons are spent alternatively in Catechism class, in the Opus Dei instruction circles, and participating in meetings of organizations that spearheaded the anti-abortion movement in Argentina. He attends mass almost every day, and he reads the Bible before he turns in for the night.

As for Santiago’s political life, he voted for Cambiemos in 2015, and at the time of the interview he feels disappointed by its administration. He even campaigned for the Republican Proposal Party, but he left the party because he considered that the coalition was “more of the same.” He was a campaigner, election overseer, and secretary of communication of a township. However, the discussion in Congress about the possible legalization of abortion was a turning point. He states so emphatically:

I worry about the moral values. When I saw this thing about housing for transsexuals, the hormonization, and all of it paid for with our taxes, I said “enough, this I will not compromise on.” When it comes to the economy we can disagree, let’s negotiate, but on the subject of life and family I won’t, because that’s the basis of society, if you knock that everything comes tumbling down. What they want to do with sexual education is madness. My peers would tell me, “don’t go, we agree with you,” but no one would do anything about it.

In line with Argentinian liberal tradition,³⁹ Santiago’s arguments on economic freedom sympathize with a conservative-authoritarian stance on the rest of the spheres of social life : “It was always clear to me what family was, what

life was, even if I wasn't an activist, I never questioned it. Family is this and life is this, there is no discussion. Now we have to explain that life begins at conception, it's preposterous."

Reading, Writing and Praxis

Pamela is 33 years old; she's from Ecuador and has lived in Buenos Aires ever since she reached legal adulthood. In addition to being a professor of English Language at a private university, she introduces herself as a translator, a columnist for the *Panam Post*, a volunteer for *Fundación Libre*, and co-founder of the Libertarian Party of Cuba.

Pamela says she agrees with some of Agustín Laje's ideas but not so much with others. Having the "plus" of being a woman enables her to raise certain issues and to delve deep, unlike the young personality of the Argentinian alt right, who "has to hold back, even when it doesn't look like it." About Laje, she observes that "he values the first wave of feminism. I don't. It's a discrepancy we have. I go much further than him. For example, he proposes that capitalism liberated women, and I counter that women were never subjugated." Dissenting is an act that allows her to take a stand, firstly as a critical reader, and secondly as a columnist and writer with her own ideas. She considers herself "more of an anarchist" than the president of *Fundación Libre* because she adheres to "paleolibertarianism," a variety of libertarianism developed by theorists Murray Rothbard and Lew Rockwell which combines conservative cultural values with an opposition to State intervention and to the State's very existence. The classical liberal view Laje upholds, however, proposes a minimal State, with norms of justice and security. "That," Pamela says, "will necessarily change your conception of feminism and the vote. If you want the State to stay out of your life, you don't want to preserve any of those things."

Although she thinks being female and speaking on feminism is a cliché, Pamela plans to write a book on the subject for the publisher Unión. She doesn't have any drafts yet, but she wants to show that feminism is functional to socialism. On that note, she imagines a title that would mislead at first glance and which might therefore look appealing to left-wing audiences—something along the lines of "Feminism and Socialism, Two

Intertwined Paths”—so that the reader might find content significantly different from what they expected as they get deeper into the book.

Pamela feels that it is crucial to achieve unity between the various right-wing ideologies: “A friend told me the other day . . . I thought he was going to say that I was leaning too far into conservatism lately, but he said: ‘you are a liberal, you’re more liberal than actual liberals.’ ‘Why?’ I asked him. ‘Because you tolerate conservatives.’” This invoking of an ethics of tolerance among right-wing doctrines reemerged at several points during the interview. She liked Márquez’ closing words on this subject at the Belgrano auditorium and ever since has adopted them for herself:

I thought it was very meaningful when he said that nationalism should direct its love towards the country and liberate it from the State, make it about the nation and not about the State. When he told conservatives to embrace progress, and liberals to value life as the first right. Then draw upon the ground we have in common and teach the others wherever their knowledge is sparse. I thought that was very constructive.

But the amalgam of liberal, Catholic-nationalist, and conservative values requires a series of flexibilities and efforts that go beyond the reading of these works, beyond pen and paper. It compels one to adopt behaviours and practices in daily life, as a sort of praxis where the work and the activism need to be revalidated and fed back into the plane of ideas by engaging in activities and commitments on the ground. Ever since she got involved in the “pro-life” campaign last year and started to get public exposure, Pamela began to frequent religious sociability circles despite lacking a past link to faith. Once a month, she visits public hospitals with an evangelical group because she considers that being pro-life and “just wanting the baby to be born” is very easy: “I can’t proclaim to be pro-life if I only put any dedication into stopping abortions. That’s what they accuse us of, caring only as far as the birth!” On the imperative to adapt, she interprets that Christian morality provides a framework of values that becomes compatible with her libertarian affiliation in so far as it promotes solidarity networks in the private sphere and contests the State’s moral hegemony to determine what is right and wrong. She also does charity work with a Catholic organization, although this does not inhibit

her from criticizing the sluggish reaction of the Church when it came to rallying Christians behind the “pro-life” movement. Laughing, she recalls the time she entered a Catholic space through an acquaintance:

It was funny because they introduced me as “a very Catholic friend” and I thought, “Me? Very Catholic?” I didn’t even receive confirmation, I don’t even know the words to say during the rites. And to top it off, they made a video about the birth of the pro-life movement and I’m in it! [She laughs] I appear with a rosary and standing next to a friar! It’s not that I renege on it, I’m just not a representative of . . . I mean, in my case, it wasn’t my faith that led me to the pro-life movement but rather the pro-life movement that led me to the Church.

Religion and Politics

“She knows loads,” Joaquín tells us about Pamela, outside the Belgrano auditorium event. At 26 years old, Joaquín is an industrial engineering student in Universidad Nacional of San Martín. Joaquín is at the “initial research” phase, still in the “learning stage.” From the outset, he warns us that he has never had the habit of reading, but he wants to get into it. Although his copy of Laje and Marquéz’ book about the “new Left” rests on his bookshelf at home, and he vows to read it soon, he doesn’t believe the book to be the only option for millennials who, like him, prefer an audiovisual format.

Joaquín comes from a Christian family in which music occupies a prominent position. His grandfather was an evangelist and a record producer, and his uncle is a singer in a band and a prominent minister in Christian sociability circles. Joaquín has been in a band with his cousin and some friends for a few years. They write Christian music—not because they set out to do it but because “it just happened that way”:

You don’t notice when you hear the songs, anyway, we just can’t help it that our songs have to do with that. For us, it wasn’t like “we form a band and we have an obligation to write about God and to say he’s good.” No, it’s something that comes out naturally.

The fact that his father is a gynecologist contributed to him being exposed to the issue of abortion and to being instilled with a respect for “life” from a very young age. He explains, however, that initially the topic had no political connotation whatsoever. Rather, it was the expression and confirmation of the Christian moral values his family observed, combined with the medical expertise of his father, who would give talks and seminars discouraging the practice. According to Joaquín, it was not that he got into politics but rather that politics surreptitiously snuck into his life (“it started to slowly creep into the environments I was in”). First, it was through his older brother, who is a pioneer in the public debates against abortion. And second, through the discussions of the subject in Congress between May and August in 2018.

The rite of passage that Pamela went through in the past year—a journey where her ideological affiliation and her joining the “pro-life” movement brought her to religious sociability spaces— happened in reverse in Joaquín’s case. The congressional debate spurred him to adapt his thinking on the same subjects, shifting away from an exclusively religious perspective to resort instead to a logic that aims to be political. “God gave us life and life is sacred, because it is God’s creation. And to corrupt it in any way is wrong,” Joaquín reasons. “It is so simple, I mean, there isn’t anything convoluted about it. For restoring and restituting religion it’s an important tool, but,” he concludes, “I think it’s practically worthless to use as an argument.” To cover this deficit, the personalities he follows and admires provided him with the conceptual tools to understand the political context he is in and his position within it, as well as to revisit his past from a “critical thinking” point of view:

I was completely apolitical and suddenly I started to understand where I was positioned in politics. I realized that throughout my entire life, at school, in secondary school, in university those first couple of years, in many phases of my education, they tried to influence me towards the Left. One day . . . you know when you go through old things to throw out? Well, I was looking at primary school stuff and suddenly I see all the notebooks and I think, “Wow, what happened?”

Entering these spaces of sociability and circulation of ideas was a liminal moment for many youths,⁴⁰ a transition and tipping point, which demanded

first that they deliberate on and make conscious the identifying categories that previously organized their worldview, and then later to distance themselves from those categories and discard them. In Joaquín's case, the retrospective effort he makes to disentangle the influence "the Left" had on his education is curiously never channeled with a similar drive to examine the weight his Christian upbringing had in his trajectory. Such an introspection seems to him to be unnecessary. The moral structures and the reasonings built from his beliefs continue to operate in the new spaces of the fight against "gender ideology." Just as faith constitutes a basis for religious spirituality, Joaquín admires Laje in the strictly "political" sphere because he "reads so much, he's constantly citing people you've never even heard of, but you believe him! He's so sure of what he's saying that you believe him!" In these spaces where the politicization of the sacred and the sanctification of politics intertwine and invoke each other in such a particular way, this young fan, like many others, is captivated by the personalities of the Argentinian alt right because "they put into words what one is feeling, they find exactly the right words to express something when you don't even know very well what it is."

Conclusion

In November 2023, the victory in the presidential elections of the first extreme right party in Argentina stunned several local and international political analysts, considering the brief political trajectory of the elected candidate, Javier Milei. Under the idea that the dynamics of the political field cannot be explained only from political logics, this article reviewed a previous cultural phenomenon, which gained strength in 2016 and contributed to the growth of the Argentine far-right: the publication of right-wing books and their reception in the youth sector.

Not only do these books enable the materialization and systematization of pre-existing ideas and social narratives, but they also play an active role in the proliferation of new political relationships and identities. As such, they function as a vector and a resource for the production and consolidation of political cultures and sociabilities in a country where, years ago, few individuals defined themselves as right-wing.

The readers of Agustín Laje and Nicolás Márquez feel that these personalities and their books distil feelings and thoughts they lacked the words to express themselves, and value the fact that they provide them with “data.” While they stand in line in these events so that the authors can bestow on them the additional symbolic marking of their signature, in everyday life the book facilitates identification and recognition among peers, as well as opposition to and discussion with ideological adversaries.

Additionally, in a context where the priority was to consolidate a social and political force capable of integrating the different branches within the Right, these young people display inclinations for specific ideological traditions while maintaining a receptive disposition towards other schools of thought within these spaces. Books such as *The Black Book of the New Left* and the events and spaces that flourish from them enable readers to rediscover other traditions that are coalescing within the Right, and to define and redefine their political identity in new terms. Furthermore, they may also arouse readers’ interest in the distribution of symbolic capital that books provide, to the point of having and writing their own books.

This paper aims to make a contribution to the analysis of the link between culture and politics, taking into account the role of the book, its instances, and mediation agents in the construction of sociability spaces where current extreme right-wing narratives circulate and proliferate. For future research we envision, in the first place, advancing the knowledge of the publishing circuit of these books, analyzing the trajectories of the publishers, editors, authors, and communicators involved; and in the second place, to speak to these personalities to analyze, among other elements, the value they assign to the book as an artifact for the dissemination of ideas. We consider it imperative to analyze the material elements that orient the production, circulation, and reception of these books, in addition to studying the ideas advocated for by these authors.

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Notes

¹ Pablo Semán, ed. *Están entre nosotros. ¿De dónde sale y hasta dónde puede llegar la extrema derecha que no vimos venir?* (Buenos Aires: Siglo XXI, 2023).

² Peronism is a movement born in 1945 from the consecration of Juan Domingo Perón as a political leader in tune with the popular majorities. It was consolidated as a political identity within the labour movement during Perón's first two presidencies, between 1946 and 1955. Since then, this political tradition has mutated and redefined itself according to the context and the internal turnover of its leaders. In addition, the centre right has been represented in *Cambiemos*, an electoral alliance that brings together leaders of Unión Cívica Radical [Radical Civic Union]—the first modern and liberal party in Argentina, which fought for the expansion of suffrage in the first decade of the twentieth century—and leaders of Propuesta Republicana [Republican Proposal Party], founded in 2005 by businessman Mauricio Macri, and composed mostly of liberal and conservative sectors. In 2015 the alliance was elected and Macri assumed the presidency. In 2019 he lost the elections to Alberto Fernández, candidate of the centre-left Frente de Todos [Front of All].

³ Verónica Giordano, “¿Qué hay de nuevo en las <nuevas derechas>?” *Revista Nueva Sociedad* 254 (2014): 46–56.

⁴ Sergio Morresi, “Acá somos todos democráticos. El PRO y las relaciones entre la derecha y la democracia en Argentina,” in *Hagamos equipo, PRO y la construcción de la nueva derecha en Argentina*, ed. Gabriel Vommaro and Sergio Morresi (Buenos Aires: UNGS, 2015), 163–201.

⁵ Pablo Stefanoni, *¿La rebeldía se volvió de derecha? Cómo el antiprogresismo y la anticorrección política están construyendo un nuevo sentido común (y por qué la izquierda debería tomarlos en serio)* (Buenos Aires: Siglo XXI, 2021).

⁶ The links between publishing and right-wing political culture are replicated in other regions of Latin America, where different intellectual and media referents publish books and gain thousands of followers on social networks. Two other cases are the Guatemalan political scientist and writer Gloria Álvarez, and the Chilean lawyer and writer Axel Kaiser. Through the publication of numerous books and an active insertion in different think tanks, they have positioned themselves as intellectuals.

⁷ Ezequiel Saferstein, *¿Cómo se fabrica un best-seller político? La trastienda de los éxitos editoriales y su capacidad de intervenir en la agenda pública* (Buenos Aires: Siglo XXI, 2021).

⁸ Juan Luis Besoky, “La derecha peronista. Prácticas políticas y representaciones (1943-1976)” (PhD diss., Universidad Nacional de La Plata, 2016); Martín Vicente, *De la refundación al ocaso. Los intelectuales liberal-conservadores ante la última dictadura* (La Plata: FaHCE/UNGS, 2015); Sergio Morresi, “El liberalismo conservador y la ideología del Proceso de Reorganización Nacional.” *Sociohistórica* 7 (2010): 103–35.

⁹ Sandra McGee Deutsch, *Las derechas. La extrema derecha en la Argentina, el Brasil y Chile 1890-1939* (Buenos Aires: Universidad Nacional de Quilmes, 2005); Ernesto Bohoslavsky and Daniel Lvovich, “Elitismo, violencia y degeneración física en los diagnósticos de las derechas argentina y chilena (1880–1945),” *Nuevo Mundo Nuevos Debates* (Nov. 29, 2009), <https://doi.org/10.4000/nuevomundo.57777>; Gabriela Gomes, Ernesto Bohoslavsky, and Magdalena Broquetas, “Juventudes conservadoras en los años sesenta en Argentina, Chile y Uruguay,” in *El pensamiento conservador y derechista en América Latina, España y Portugal. Siglos XIX y XX*, ed. Ulrich Mücke and Fabián Kolar (Madrid; Frankfurt: Iberoamericana-Vervuert, 2018), [289–311].

¹⁰ Victoria Gessaghi, *La educación de la clase alta argentina: entre la herencia y el mérito* (Buenos Aires: Siglo XXI, 2016).

¹¹ Paula Canelo and Ana Castellani, “Empresarios en el Estado. Radiografía del gabinete nacional actual,” Presentation, Oct. 24, 2016. <https://citra.org.ar/publicaciones/empresarios-en-el-estado-radiografia-del-gabinete-nacional-actual/>.

¹² Gabriel Vommaro, *La larga marcha de Cambiemos: la construcción silenciosa de un proyecto de poder* (Buenos Aires: Siglo XXI, 2017).

¹³ Juan Grandinetti, “La militancia juvenil del partido Propuesta Republicana (PRO) en los centros de estudiantes universitarios,” *Revista SAAP* 13 (2019): 77–106; Melina Vázquez, Dolores Rocca Rivarola, and Alejandro Cozachcow, *Fotografías de las juventudes militantes en Argentina. Un análisis de los compromisos políticos juveniles en el Movimiento Evita, el Partido Socialista y el PRO entre 2013 y 2015* (Villa María: Universidad Nacional de Villa María, 2016). http://biblio.unvm.edu.ar/opac_css/doc_num.php?explnum_id=1077.

¹⁴ Gabriel Kessler and Gabriel Vommaro, “La era de las sensibilidades autoritarias,” *Revista Anfibia*, Dec. 28, 2018. <https://revistaanfibia.com/ensayo/la-era-de-las-sensibilidades-autoritarias/>.

¹⁵ Gustavo Sorá, *Editar desde la izquierda en América Latina* (Buenos Aires: Siglo XXI, 2017).

¹⁶ Horacio Tarcus, *Marx en Argentina* (Buenos Aires: Siglo XXI, 2013); Sorá, *Editar desde la izquierda en América Latina*; Marisa M. Deaecto and Jean-Yves Mollier, eds., *Edição e revolução: Leituras comunistas no Brasil e na França* (Belo Horizonte; São Paulo: Ateliê Editorial and Editora UFMG, 2013).

¹⁷ Claudio Benzecry, “Con una ayudita de mis amigos. Apuntes hacia una comprensión de la sociabilidad en las presentaciones de libros,” *Apuntes de investigación* 4 (1999): 57–83.

¹⁸ Robert Darnton, “La France, ton café fout le camp!: De l’histoire du livre à l’histoire de la communication,” *Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales* 100 (1993): 16–26.

¹⁹ Nitzán Shoshan, *El manejo del odio. Nación, afecto y gobernanza de la derecha extrema en Alemania* (Ciudad de México: El Colegio de México, 2017).

²⁰ After years of unsuccessful attempts, in 2018 the law was debated in parliament and did not pass; in 2020 the correlation of forces was reversed, and abortion was legalized.

²¹ Between 1976 and 1983 Argentina experienced its last dictatorship. This was the most emblematic period of the recent history due to the terror apparatus that the fascist government implemented, leaving 30,000 missing persons, according to the surveys carried out by academics, human rights organizations and public bodies.

²² Valentina Salvi, *De vencedores a víctimas Memorias militares sobre el pasado reciente en la Argentina* (Buenos Aires: Biblos, 2012).

²³ The “complete memory” claim was born in the late 1990s within the Argentine Army. Their supporters affirm that the disappeared and the system of terror installed during the last Argentine dictatorship are part of a “partial” truth disseminated by the media and human rights organizations, which needed to be “completed” with “another truth”: that of crimes committed by armed organizations.

²⁴ Unlike in other countries (most notably the US), in Argentina the political category of “liberal” denotes a political tradition that usually falls under the Right and which has historically been opposed to left-wing and centre-left alternatives.

²⁵ In recent years, a libertarian nucleus with great force among the youth has emerged in Argentina. Their followers follow the American Murray Rothbard (translated and published by Unión), whose principles have united a heterogeneous right-wing culture. The reading of Rothbard is combined with the work of the Austrian School economists, also published by Unión (Stefanoni, *¿La rebeldía se volvió de derecha?*).

²⁶ Unión was born in Spain and for the past few years it has been focusing mostly on the publication of liberal and libertarian authors, not only from Argentina but also from Spain

(e.g. Marcos de la Fuente, Huerta de Soto) and internationally (e.g. Ludwig von Mises, Friedrich A. Hayek, Murray Rothbard).

²⁷ Ezequiel Saferstein, *¿Cómo se fabrica un best-seller político?*; Esteban Campos “¿Es posible una «memoria completa»? Acerca de olvidos y reacciones conservadoras en la narrativa histórica de los 60-70 (2006-2009)”, *Afuera. Estudios de crítica cultural*, N° 7 (2009): 243-249. A publishing circuit emerged around publications that discussed the seventies, along with the great media impact of best sellers by Juan Yofre and Ceferino Reato (published by Random House from 2008). This crowd endeavored to broadcast discordant narratives crafted by individuals who based their legitimacy as authors on the fact that they had been “protagonists” in the seventies: “contrite” former activists who expressed regret for having participated in guerilla organizations (Hector Leis, *Un testamento de los 70. Terrorismo, política y verdad en la Argentina* [Buenos Aires: Siglo XXI, 2013]; Claudia Hilb, *Usos del pasado. Qué hacemos hoy con los setenta* [Buenos Aires: Siglo XXI, 2013]) and “complete memory” activists (Carlos Manfroni and Villarruel, *Los otros muertos. Las víctimas civiles del terrorismo guerrillero de los 70* [Buenos Aires: Sudamericana, 2014]), among others. Although they all approached the topic from different angles, they all criticized the “official narrative” of the Kirchner administrations.

²⁸ Agustín Laje and Nicolás Márquez, *The Black Book of the New Left: Gender Ideology or Cultural Subversion* (Unión Editorial, 2016).

²⁹ Besoky, “La derecha peronista,” 28.

³⁰ Benzecry, “Con una ayudita de mis amigos.”

³¹ Darnton, “La France, ton café fout le camp!”

³² Charles Maurras (1868-1952) was a French politician and poet who advocated an integral nationalism of monarchical character. With a markedly anti-semitic discourse, his ideas were taken up by different right-wing movements in the twentieth century, having a particular arrival in some Argentine nationalist circles (Jerónimo Cercósimo, “Charles Maurras y los nacionalistas argentinos. Recepción y ‘usos’ en los años posperonistas,” *Prismas - Revista de Historia Intelectual* 21, no. 1 (2017): 95–113).

³³ An argument made by Besoky in “La derecha Peronista.”

³⁴ “Hate speech,” referring to speech that opposes diversity and pluralism as desirable societal values, has been the subject of many debates not only in the legal field (where the possibility of enacting a law that turns it into a criminal offense is under discussion) but also in the communication sciences (revolving around the dilemma between freedom of speech and the public regulation or limitation of this type of speech).

³⁵ Besoky, “La derecha Peronista,” 13.

³⁶ We used pseudonyms to preserve the privacy of the interviewees.

³⁷ Tarcus, *Marx en Argentina*, 34.

³⁸ The Radical Civic party in Argentina (UCR) is a moderate party on the centre of the political spectrum. In the 2015 elections, the Radical party allied itself with the right-wing party Republican Proposal and formed the *Cambiamos* coalition.

³⁹ See Vicente, *De la refundación al ocaso*.

⁴⁰ See Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and AntiStructure* (New Brunswick: Aldine Transaction, 1969).

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