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A Workshop's Report

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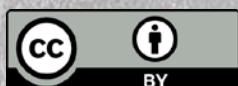
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Richard Palomar Vidal

The phenomenon of the New Right in European and Latin American narrative literature

A Workshop's Report

Richard Palomar Vidal

is a research associate and doctoral student at the Institute of Romance Languages and Literatures at Freie Universität Berlin.

richard.palomar.vidal@fu-berlin.de

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The workshop “The phenomenon of the New Right in European and Latin American narrative literature: New perpetrators – old patterns of thinking?” organised by Dr. Lena Seauve took place on 13 October 2023 at the Institute for Latin American Studies (Lateinamerika-Institut) of the Freie Universität Berlin (Boltzmannstraße 1, 14195 Berlin) and gathered a panel of international experts to discuss and put into perspective this very current question.

On the Terminology of the ‘New Right’

Before the very start of the workshop, Dr. Lena Seauve put special emphasis on the choice of words for the title of the event, focusing on the origin of the term ‘New Right’. It derives from the French ‘nouvelle droite’ and the German ‘neue Rechte’, which are not equivalent to the English ‘new right’, which is often used to describe a form of neo-liberal conservatism. Seauve also asserted that far-right thinking is no longer limited to specific countries but has taken on a global dimension. For the workshop, this served as the connecting point to look at the movement globally, bringing in perspectives from European countries, such as France, Italy and the United Kingdom, and South America, namely Brazil, Argentina and Chile.

Thus, the workshop aimed to illustrate this pluriform phenomenon and establish commonalities between the different countries and their literatures while contemplating figures, texts, and modes of thinking from and about the far right.

Mathieu, Despentès, Jenni and the 'embourgeoisement' of the right-wing movement in France

In the opening presentation entitled "Maurras' Shadow: Narratives and Figurations of the Extreme Right in the Contemporary French Novel", Dr. Markus A. Lenz (Potsdam/Konstanz) put an emphasis on the two different far right movements that can be observed in France. On the one hand, there is a radical and relatively old-fashioned far right. On the other, there is a newer, more intellectual far right that sees themselves as a novel, free-thinking elite and wants to distinguish themselves from aforementioned old right. As the most striking example for this, Lenz named Marion Maréchal, a French right-wing politician and founder of the private school *Institut des sciences sociales, économiques et politiques* (ISSEP). Thus, Lenz also spoke of a movement of 'embourgeoisement' within the French far right with a seemingly democratic rhetoric intended to mask islamophobia, homophobia, sexism and anti-European thinking.

In the field of French literature, the far-right movement is almost omnipresent in 21st century narratives, usually being depicted as a traditional and radical right-wing ideology, without dealing with the complexities of the movement itself. The emergence of the new far right and the intricacies of its strategies and concepts are often either summarized or left unexplored, while most of the focus lies on the evolution towards right-wing political ideologies and political parties.

Lenz quoted three fictional texts that narrate contemporary French society: Nicolas Mathieu's 2018 novel *Leurs enfants après eux* (*And Their Children After Them*), Virginie Despentes' trilogy from 2015–2017 *Vernon Subutex* and Alexis Jenni's 2011 historical novel *L'art Français de la guerre* (*The French Art of War*). In these novels, as in countless others, characters are displayed that are either born into a right wing-family, deliberately choose to join a radical right group or experience a left-to-right-change in their ideology and political party support. Betrayal, the loss of identity, the despair of a working class with no solidarity mechanism and the traumas of France's colonial past are persistent themes throughout the texts.

The reasons for the strengthening of the far right cannot be understood if the movement is not seen untrunked, which is what Lenz argued for in his talk. Literature may be running the risk of creating an echo chamber that reinforces simplistic notions of the far right, failing to engage with the intricate and potentially hazardous argumentation strategies employed by right-wing intellectuals.

Colonialism, fascism and Mussolini: Italian history through Francesca Melandri's *Sangue giusto*

Dr. Guido Bartolini (Ghent), second speaker with his talk titled "Fascism and the Far-Right in Contemporary Italy: Thinking Critically about the Past with Francesca Melandri's *Sangue Giusto*", shifted the focus towards Italy, acknowledging the similarities with the French case.

The current Italian political scene tends to be equated to fascism, which, as Bartolini argued by referring to Hanna Meretoja's 2018 book *The Ethics of Storytelling*,

obfuscates the understanding of present and past, especially in the country that gave birth to Benito Mussolini's fascism and is the sole Western European nation with a far-right prime minister, Giorgia Meloni. Emilio Gentile, writer of *Chi è Fascista* ('Who is a Fascist') published in 2019, advocates for a very restrictive usage of the term 'fascism', this solely being when referring to the revolutionary movements created after World War I.

Bartolini argued that the study of history would lose its significance if we were to detach historical events from future reverberations and were not allowed to create connections between them, which is why he pleaded for a memory culture that is able to recognise the most hidden continuities between different historical eras.

Francesca Melandri's 2017 novel *Sangue giusto* ('Right Blood' or 'Just Blood') serves as an ideal example for the importance of a critical perspective on the past. The novel is structured in a multitemporal dimension, intertwining events from various eras of Italian history with the story of a Roman family that was involved in the occupation of present-day Ethiopia. This multilayeredness allows the narration to show how migration, colonial violence, racism, xenophobia, as well as twentieth and twenty-first century politics are connected to each other, asking what it means to establish anti-fascist memory in Italy.

The frame story is set between 2010 and 2012, a time when Italian political culture made a shift towards the right and when revisionism was, therefore, part of political debates again. The revisionist memory culture that right-wing movements fight for has its origin in the 1990s and early 2000s and refers to a series of attacks orchestrated by right-wing memory activists to undermine the legacy of Italy's Antifascist Resistance.

Through the stories narrated in the novel, *Sangue Giusto* represents the revisionist instrumentalization of the past, reconstructs the darkest pages of Italian colonialism while developing a perpetrator memory, and asks the reader to reflect on their own implication and privileges in unjust systems by showing the implication of the main characters in Italian colonial history.

The role of Nazism in British novels and its importance for the far right

In "Writing the British Far-Right", Dr. Joanne Pettitt (Kent) presented the case of the fictional representation of British far-right politics and its historical background and deep-rooted relation to World War II.

A key fact to keep in mind when analysing the emergence and development of the far right in Britain is the country's collective memory, which is based around the opposition to fascism during the war, more specifically Germany and Italy.

As Pettitt pointed out, a specific connection and tension exists between overt far-right groups and Nazism, one which is ideologically underpinned by fascist ideas (e.g., symbols, German characters, references to Adolf Hitler). These groups are based around a specific idea of 'Britishness', often supported by references to the

war, and represent an underlying ideology that appears to contradict common wartime narratives.

This tension fuels the representation of the far right in literature, where it develops into an uncanny presence and creates yet another tension, namely being familiar and homely in its patriotism and simultaneously foreign and disturbing in its relation to Nazism. Pettitt based her argumentation on Freud's notion of the *(Un)heimliche*, which is inherently ambivalent, signifying safety while also embodying something concealed. This notion also implies, Pettitt argued, that there is something concealed in the idea of the British home – a suppressed sentiment that has been banished due to its social unacceptability but lies latent beneath the surface.

This uncanniness is most prevalent in alternative histories about the ending of World War II, in which Britain loses the war and is occupied by Nazi Germany, such as Michael Cronin's 2006 novel *Against the Day*, John Bowen's 1994 *No Retreat* or Len Deighton's 1978 *SS-GB*. Since historical novels base their narrative around an historical event, there is no suspense, as the reader already knows what happened. Alternative histories however do not have this very problem, since they create alternative endings for these historical events. In said novels, the uncanniness works on different levels, such as the historical distortions the reader notices, the depiction of historical amnesia in which Britain is disconnected from war memories, the United Kingdom being a familiar and foreign space simultaneously, and the rise of the British right, which is portrayed as a disturbance of the natural order that needs to be overcome for the survival of the British national spirit.

Bernardo Kucinski and the notion of dystopia in the Brazilian case

Dr. Georg Walter Wink (Copenhagen) brought the discussion to South America in his talk about the "Dystopian Chronicles on the Brazilian Far-Right Shift: B. Kucinski's 'New Order' and its Collapse". Wink quoted Bernardo Kucinski – a journalist, retired professor specialized in civil-military governments, award-winning novelist and advisor of Brazil's Workers' Party *Partido dos Trabalhadores* – as one key figure in the literary treatment of the far-right shift in the country. Two of his most recent novels, *A nova ordem* from 2019 and *O colapso da nova ordem* from 2022, were both published during Bolsonaro's government and propose a literary treatment of an exceptional period of Brazilian history. During said period, the predominance of the military increased, and an authoritarian fascist ideology arose, which revived the past military dictatorship. As Wink pointed out, not enough memory work has been done in Brazil.

Approaching Kucinski's texts with the theories of Karl Mannheim, Wink argued that alternative orders are controlled by projecting them into the utopian space where they could be tolerated or even neutralized, becoming ideologies rather than utopias. Kucinski's view of the existing order in Brazil is contrarian to the one of the far right. The author sees the country as a fragile, young and vulnerable democracy with a strong past, built with enormous effort and threatened by the military roll-

back, while the far right sees it as being dominated by Cultural Marxism, which threatens to transform Brazil into a totalitarian state through utopian social engineering. This supposed utopia, however, is manmade, which is a contradiction, as utopias are given to mankind as perfect (i.e., paradise on earth) and cannot be improved.

Wink labelled these novels by Kucinski as 'dystopian chronicles', which, as he remarked, is a contradiction in itself, since a dystopia is a projection from one's own perspective, while a chronicle depicts a factual recording of events. A 'dystopian chronicle' should, according to Wink, be understood as existing in a past-present-future juxtaposition, that is, anticipating the future by looking at the present through the lens of the past. However, in reality there exist problematic implications, Wink argued, that reveal a deep misunderstanding of who the far right in Brazil is and what they are aiming to change. This misunderstanding effectively helps the far right to achieve their goals.

Bolaño, Pron, León and the aesthetic heritage of Nazism in Chilean and Argentinian literature

Dr. Lena Seauve's (Berlin) talk, entitled "Right-wing Thought in Contemporary Argentinian and Chilean Literature", served as the closing presentation for the workshop and explored the depiction of right-wing thought in contemporary Argentinean (Patricio Pron) and Chilean (Roberto Bolaño and Gonzalo León) literature, emphasizing the interplay between reality and fiction as well as the relationship between political discourse and aesthetic discourse.

There seem to be a recurring set of figures that appear in Hispanophone Latin American fiction, such as the Far-Right Intellectual or the Old Nazi. These figures are part of a literary strategy in which Nazism is used as a cipher or metaphor for contemporary political issues. The use of these ideologies often draws parallels between Nazi mindsets and the participation in violent crimes during Latin American dictatorships. Seauve argued that the new far-right movement seeks to avoid direct associations with historical Nazi or fascist movements and their symbols, yet there are still internal connections to these roots that contemporary fiction explores.

Seauve quoted three different novels that illustrate this conjunction of politics and aesthetics: Roberto Bolaños' *La literatura nazi en América* (*Nazi Literature in the Americas*) from 1996, Patricio Pron's *No derrames tus lágrimas por nadie que viva en estas calles* (*Don't Shed Your Tears for Anyone Who Lives on These Streets*) from 2016 and Gonzalo León's 2017 novel *Serrano*. These novels either raise questions about the role of representation of extreme violence in art, explore the problematic intertwining of politics and literature through the connection between fascist ideologies and the aesthetic of the avant-garde, or write the biography of a real-life political figure of the extreme far-right through the lens of a fictional group of young adherents.

All three novels share a common theme of exploring the post-1945 legacy of Nazi and fascist ideologies, albeit in diverse ways, while using fiction to depict how this

ideological and aesthetic heritage is carried forward. Pron and Bolaño make their political agendas evident through satirical and hyperbolic elements, while León's novel is marked by ambiguity, making it challenging to discern the author's stance. This lack of clear positioning makes the text problematic, a fact that also reflects in the sparseness of reviews on the novel.

In lieu of a conclusion: What can be done?

The workshop demonstrated that, despite the geographical distance, there are remarkable similarities between the countries discussed and their respective literatures, especially when considering texts from and about the far right.

The discussions were centred around three European and three Latin American countries; nevertheless, the same study could be broadened to other countries and continents for future events in order to enrich this research area that combines literary studies with urgent political matters. It is undeniable, in the wake of the most recent Argentine and Dutch election results and the rise of far-right and populist politics all over the world, that this is an omnipresent and prevailing phenomenon, not just a relic of the past we know of from history books.

In this regard, a publication would be highly welcomed and could serve as an invaluable resource in this specific area.