

Violence dressed up as heroism: the Latin American far-right and its discourse of hate*

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Abstract

This article analyses a series of memetic images that represent the heroism of the different leaders of the so-called “Latin American far-right”, and specifically, the main supporters of the First Latin American Conservative Conference: Kast (Chile), Vizcarra (Perú), Bolsonaro (Brazil), Abdo (Paraguay), Añez (Bolivia), Macri (Argentina) and Duque (Colombia). We study the main elements that constitute a specific concept of violent heroism via the collection of 48 images. The analysis is composed of two parts: 1. the detection of the connotative dimensions that are related to the legitimisation of violence; 2. the synthesis of the main categories found in the memes studied, according to the grounded theory methodology. Through this analysis we show that the memetic hero of the Latin American far-right would be characterised by receiving a divine call to save society, and in his journey a series of common symbols would be evident: strength and violent masculinity as forms of action and confrontation against evil, militarism as an ethical and aesthetic element in the organisation of the hero’s ethos, shine as an expression of differentiation, diverse cinematographic and pop symbols of appeal and relationship with historical superheroes, and the presence of humour as a form of dehumanisation of the political victims.

1 Introduction

1.1 The Latin American Conservative Conference: the inauguration of an articulated violent discourse

It was 8 December 2018. Jair Messias Bolsonaro had been appointed president of the Republic of Brazil two months earlier. That day, his third son, Federal Deputy Eduardo Bolsonaro, was leading the organisation of the so-called First Latin American Conservative Conference¹. The event brought together in the Brazilian city of Foz do Iguaçu the main figures of the so-called “far-right” in Latin America. It was a foundational event of central importance: for the first time the Latin American far-right was trying to be articulated.

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¹ Information mostly extracted from the database of the Latin American Strategic Centre for Geopolitics (CELAG).

Various statements were expressed at the event, such as “(with the left) we must do the same as the Spaniards did with the Aztecs”, “communism is death”, “let’s give freedom back to Cuba” or “let’s put an end to banditry”. However, beyond the superficiality conveyed to the media, the meeting had been organised by the Indigo Foundation, the Think Tank associated with the party of which the Bolsonaro family was then a member: the Social Liberal Party (PSL), which, in opposition to international left-wing forums such as the São Paulo Forum, promoted the internationalism of the far-right. This Latin American far-right recognised itself as opposed to “cultural Marxism”, “gender ideology”, the gay lobby, illegal immigration and what they called dictatorial governments in Cuba, Venezuela and Nicaragua.

The event was supported, in addition to the newly elected Bolsonaro, by various conservative political leaders and intellectuals. Between then and now, the period was characterised by a generational shift in the hegemony of so-called “left-wing” or “national-popular” parliamentarism in Latin America. The various leaders present at this Conference had been controversial in their countries for the various forms of violence that their speeches expressed. The different forms of violence seemed, however, to be masked in a complex construction of the heroism they projected. The Latin American Conservative Conference collaborated in organising and legitimising the construction of these far-right heroes.

Studies of the so-called “far-right” have historically been linked to European cases, influenced in turn by specific historical, social and cultural processes, such as the different forms of authoritarian governments experienced in the twentieth century, and generally treated from an interdisciplinary approach. In addition, the Tea Party phenomenon and Trumpism have also captured the attention of studies on American nativism and authoritarianism (cf. Mudde 2019). The explanation of this political, social and anthropological phenomenon is a key case study in the growing demand to understand the far-right, with the publication of Mudde’s (2007) *Populist radical right parties in Europe* being a landmark in delimiting the particularities of the phenomenon in Europe.

In this article we highlight the use of the category “far-right” to refer to the central particularity of what we call the “Latin American far-right”: the post-colonial context. The cohesive element at the regional level is the post-colonial historical situation and the gradual militarisation of the civilian sphere (cf. Montoya 2018). Latin America’s colonial roots engendered a profoundly hierarchical society whose dominant classes have felt threatened by a series of recent rights advances on the part of the most vulnerable groups, responding in reactionary terms. It is also common to observe these leaders advocating greater military investment, as well as speaking nostalgically of the order and security that military regimes would have brought to their countries in the past.

However, beyond the sociological aspects of the phenomenon, the construction of right-wing populist leaders as representatives of a mass phenomenon requires in-depth studies of new forms of communication: This context underpins the specific way in which the Latin American far-right constructs its discourse, assuming a series of implicit cultural habits that permit and produce a specific violence, which is vividly expressed in the form of production of memes. The most common type of internet meme consists of an image accompanied by text, generally inducing humorous responses in its recipients, and is even one of the most frequent forms of creative humour on the internet (cf. Dynel/Messeri 2020).

The heroism projected in the images is closely linked to the post-colonial context that justifies and legitimises their communicative functioning. The determining colonial period constructed a society that shared the order of the colony with the disorder of a “lack of moral nexus” (Prado Junior 2011), strengthened and reproduced by the normalisation of the violent brutality of the social relations of the colonial period. It is in this specific context that the Latin American far-right constructs its heroes and articulates and communicates a violent project in a discourse of hatred towards historically stigmatised sectors of the population.

Thus, this article studies the construction of the public heroism of different leaders of the Latin American far-right who supported this Conference, whose institutionalisation and internationalist legitimisation were founded on this event. To this end, a visual analysis is carried out of different representations of memetic images that represent their heroism. The article shows how the linguistic and imaginary construction of the ultra-right leadership legitimises physical and symbolic violence.

1.2 Memes in contemporary political communication

New technologies have profoundly transformed the various manifestations of political action. Dader (2020) distinguishes two forms of cyberpolitics: instrumental cyberpolitics, which encompasses instrumental techniques aimed at improving the dissemination of communication; and monitoring cyberpolitics, which aims to influence and persuade individuals in order to gain political support and votes. Along with their considerable advantages, technological processes applied to politics also present undoubted risks. Berrocal Gonzalo (2017) points to the risk of showing politics as a spectacle, and Arias-Maldonado (2016) points to the risk of excessive intervention of emotions and feelings in the communicative processes of political leadership. However, Gallardo-Paúls (2018) positively indicates the change in electoral behaviour, as the involvement of individuals is much greater than it was a few years ago, so that the degree of influence of certain elites to manipulate information has fallen. However, this involvement presents the danger of a simplification of content. In this new context of political communication, memetic images are making a strong appearance.

The term *meme* has become popular in its humorous use, although it is by no means its only characteristic. It is a type of humour that various authors refer to as multimodal and complex (cf. Ross/Rivers 2017; Smith 2019; Hakoköngas/Halmesvaara/Sakki 2020). Shifman (2014) points to an extremely interesting characteristic for the analysis of its effects. This is hyper-meaning, which is understood as the accumulation or condensation of meanings in a single image or in the image and text as a whole.

The meanings of memes cannot be separated from the cultural contexts in which they are created. They often contain allusions to other images or cultural meanings, previously created prototypes or formulated stereotypes in force in the culture in which they are created and disseminated (cf. Bayarri/Fernández-Villanueva 2023). Memes are also used by political parties with a persuasive purpose, capable of transforming the perception of the original partisan intentions. They operate through short, synthetic, simple and evaluative sentences, with a mobilising function (cf. *ibid.*). As Ahmed (2013) points out, emotions attach to and are mobilised by the objects, images and symbols that are offered by digital media. The effects are multiple, and largely unknown as they have a non-rational or non-conscious perceptual dimension. Parker (2019)

points to the importance of imaginary aspects of memes, of their sense of attraction and replication of the infantile and/or non-conscious, and from this perspective they incite an unknown pleasure, which is not easy to decipher and cannot be named, but are no less effective for that.

The effects of memes are also mediated by other characteristics: a) They are products whose origin is mostly unknown, so they have no defined authorship; b) neither responsibility nor intention can be clearly attributed to them, as they are often presented as something inconsequential, lacking in seriousness, like a joke. In this sense, we understand the joke not just as a text with a classic build-up to a punchline but as a form of communication whose purpose is to amuse or make people laugh by confronting them with a situation that distorts reality.

However, different examples distinguish between jokes and symbolic violence, such as sexist, racist or anti-Semitic humour (cf. Bemiller and Zimmer Schneider 2010), objectively and independently of the recipient's perception of violence (cf. Parrot/Hopp 2020). Memes present various rhetorical devices, which condition the way in which recipients interpret their meanings. Images can suggest through their condensed symbolic components certain arguments that are not made explicit verbally. Barthes (1991), in his analysis of advertising posters, distinguishes three types of messages: the linguistic message, the denoted message and the connoted message. Most interesting from the point of view of persuasion is the connotative message, which refers to cultural meanings that are hidden but suggested by association or displacement. In the case of memes of leaders or heroes, this dimension is the one that contains allusions to the meanings of each cultural context in which the meme is disseminated, and in our article, specifically to the Latin American context.

1.3 The costumes of violence

1.3.1. The representation of victims: legitimising violence under the camouflage of humour

Psychosocial studies on violence usually understand violence as physical aggression caused with the intention to harm or humiliate, while humour seems not to cause harm, but joy and laughter. However, as Potter/Warren (1998) point out, humour often camouflages violence. Violence has been part of humour throughout history, and violent or aggressive humour has recently become a common tactic in politics. Violence can be interpreted in terms of humour when it is accompanied by surprise, when it violates certain communicative codes, when it is presented together with other people laughing, as well as when it is accompanied by humorous music (cf. Gulas/Weinberger/Swani 2017). Satire is very powerful as it is situated in a borderline zone of political discourse and presents a complex logic that is difficult to understand in the midst of public discourses and media in its various genres (cf. Drees/Leeuw 2015).

Sarcasm, understood as strong indirect criticism in the form of humour, is a type of aggressive humour that serves several functions (cf. Toplak/Katz 2000). Toplak/Katz (2000) found that it is more harmful than direct criticism, and is perceived as less sincere, tactless, offensive, aggressive, anger-provoking, unconstructive and lacking in clarity. Consequently, satirical humour must be understood as a weapon. The far-right uses new technologies as a fundamental form of political communication, and among them the production of internet memes stands out. But the

truth is that their supposedly humorous productions are far from being real jokes, using dangerous codes that cause immediate damage and prepare other damage to be done in the future.

The ultra-right polarisation that divides society into an *us* versus *them* is achieved through resources such as fear, manipulation, lapidary assertions, irony, sarcasm directed at the enemy and the discrediting of what has been understood as politics (cf. Soler Gallo 2019). Satire and violence disguised as humour are mechanisms that trivialise and justify the use of violence against the groups that the far-right see as enemies (cf. Fernández-Villanueva/Bayarri 2021a).

1.3.2. The representation of heroes and leaders: the other face of hatred and the legitimisation of violence

The prejudice, mockery and the process of criminalisation of the victims of fascist violence have been studied in some detail (cf. Feldman 2014; Bevelander/Wodak 2019). Prejudice, symbolic violence and dehumanisation during the Jewish genocide have been made visible with great precision. Fernández-Villanueva/Bayarri (2021a) studied the humoristic-aggressive mechanisms of Bolsonarismo and the Spanish far-right, Vox (cf. Fernández-Villanueva/Bayarri 2021b). In addition, the volume edited by Wodak/Richardson (2013), *Analysing Fascist Discourse: European Fascism in Talk and Text*, analyses these movements in several European countries.

But less attention has been paid to the importance of the violence that is implicit in the construction of heroes and the representation of far-right leaders. The violence of the leaders is attempted to be justified in all forms of communication, with similar mechanisms appearing in verbal language and images. From Hitler's Germany, one can see how Nazism distorted everyday language, repressing and modifying the use of words in order to justify violence (cf. Klemperer 2001). Language operated by repetition and emphasis at rallies, and by a spasmodic and sonorous rhetoric that helped to build an atmosphere of fanatical delirium.

Words were "nazified", that is, they acquired a meaning in the service of politics and violence. One of these words, whose frequency was both self-interestedly increased and disturbed in its meaning, is the word *hero*. The analysis of visual contents of the period shows the importance of heroism in the legitimisation of violence. The notion of the hero in Nazism was connoted by physical strength, and there was no intellectual dimension to the heroes, who were depicted covered in blood, armed, facing physical danger, showing leadership in their spirit of victory, and as muscular, half-naked or uniformed beings.

The qualification of Nazism heroism extended beyond the question of fighting; it also applied to sporting and competitive activities and to the violence of the workers in the concentration camps. The Nazi concept of heroism was external and distorted. There was no place for other kinds of heroes. This distortion of language and the aggressive association with the hero are still characteristic of the international far-right today. The repetition of terms and ideas as well as the repression of others can be observed today in the documents of far-right parties and in their public manifestations. It should not be forgotten, as Wodak (2015) points out, that fear of the other is one of the most relevant elements that legitimise the use of violence.

In coherence with the accentuation of fear and the supposed need for defence, heroes and leaders are represented emphasising bravery, an aggressive image, physical strength, willingness to

fight, preparation for confrontation and fighting. This is also the case in the memes of Latin American far-right-wing leaders, since, as we will show below, international ethical and aesthetic elements are reproduced in the sub-continental environment. Differences will not be constructed on the basis of these ethical and aesthetic elements, but on the basis of the concrete collectives to be stigmatised as a result of colonial miscegenation.

2 Material and methods

We set out to analyse the memetic representation of some of the most representative leaders of Latin American far-right-wing parties that supported and organised the Latin American Conservative Conference. The aim is to investigate how such heroic representations contribute to legitimising political violence against opponents, whom they stereotype, despise, and dehumanise.

Memes were approached using this grounded theory (cf. Strauss/Corbin 1994), which systematises qualitative research through the construction of hypotheses and theories combining data collection and content analysis. Mey/Dietrich (2016) propose an analysis of visual products based on the methodology that sustains grounded theory; this approach is useful for our proposed objective of situating far-right heroicity practices based on visual presentation. In particular, we employed a critical visual methodology to interpret visual images.

A first phase of analysis is the inventory of images in which we assume that the categories indicated by the previous research are present (exaltation, overvaluation, extraordinary strength, brilliance), followed by a more detailed analysis of the most superficial and descriptive aspects of the images (called by Barthes 1991 “denotative axis”) and finally the meanings and connotations that are related to the different socio-cultural contexts and in our case in relation to the heroes of fiction on which the images are based (connotative axis). The procedure according to Ruppel/Mey (2017) requires a successive and continuous revision of the data obtained to produce new reflections and a new search for dimensions and categories derived from or collateral to the initial codes.

For this, the methodology takes as a reference the hypersignification (i. e. the different meanings concentrated) of memes and their linguistic, denotative and connotative dimension described by Barthes (1991). This method has recently been used in studies on electoral campaigns and gender violence prevention campaigns (cf. Moreno et al. 2019). It can also be considered one of the variants of qualitative content analysis that are described by Schreier et al. (2019).

In this way, we analyse the significance of the heroicity of a sample of 48 memes from the electoral campaigns of Latin American ultra-right-wing leaders. The selection of these 48 images is the result of a Google search of the conservative figures who attended the First Latin American Conservative Conference. These memes have been extracted from two of the main websites that allow users to produce, share and distribute memes: Pinterest and Memedroid. The memes chosen are those that we have found on these pages to be repeated at least twice.

The persons depicted are 7 figures from 7 different Latin American countries: Kast (Chile; 7 memes), Vizcarra (Peru; 6 memes), Bolsonaro (Brazil; 8 memes), Abdo (Paraguay; 7 memes), Añez (Bolivia; 6 memes), Macri (Argentina; 7 memes) and Duque (Colombia; 7 memes).

2 Analysis and results: the memetic hero of the Latin American far-right

In this section we analyse the main elements that we have detected in the 48 memetic images collected. The elements detected in the 48 memetic images are often common and transversal among the different images. Thus, the memetic hero of the Latin American far-right displays the following characteristics, sorted by frequency: a) divinisation (42,04%), b) the glitter of celebrity (37,8%), c) physical strength, bravery and authoritarianism (violent masculinity) (63,8%), d) armed militarism, (41,07%), e) humorous dehumanisation of the enemy (27,6 %). In order to show these results, we use a sample of some of them and dissect their descriptions around the specific element to be analysed.

3.1 The hero's saving mission: divinisation



Figure 1: Divinisation of political leaders (Source: Pinterest/Memedroid, assembled by the authors)

The superhero is a character who possesses extraordinary or supernatural power. The gaze towards the sky is present in three images of these leaders: They are in a certain way a superman with exaggerated, mythologised, imaginary characters, reminiscent of the ancestral myths of heroes or gods. They are mythical beings who confront the forces of evil. And they have a salvific mission that they receive from the divinities (cf. Kershaw 2022).

The divinisation of leaders and kings is a fairly frequent phenomenon in history. And it always has a political function. Thomas Carlyle (2023) highlighted the divine and prophetic character of heroes justifying their presence and necessity in history (including Napoleon, Cromwell, Odin as well as prophets such as Muhammad). Kings or warlords are represented with a hyperbolic image of power, value and charisma that brings leaders and kings closer to divinity. Ancient images and discursive representations (cf. Michalowski 2008; Vidal 2014) highlight this

phenomenon in ancient monarchies in situations of danger or difficult conditions for monarchies or peoples.

The four memetic images in Figure 1 depict various leaders of the Latin American far-right in the guise of Superman. On the top left is Colombian president Duque, to his right, Brazilian president Bolsonaro. On the bottom left is Argentinian President Macri, and to his right is Paraguayan President Abdo.

Political leaders are capable of flight. These characters are understood as the personification of myths and desires and collaborate in the construction of a rhetoric of divine national salvation against the enemies of the homeland. Under their costumes they represent various political disputes, as can be seen in the anti-communist symbol of the super-man Bolsonaro.

The characters are presented as figures with forms of supernatural power to rid their societies of the misfortunes they point to. It is a kind of heroism constructed on the basis of a relation of affection, through the miracle, veneration and the test to be overcome. Thus, the characters represent a type of narrative: Political leaders receive a divine call to fight against evil; this call justifies violence if necessary. To this end, these leaders are endowed with magical powers, such as strength and flight, and set out on a journey to destroy the enemies of the homeland. In the face of such a challenge, the images show the leaders as self-assured, fists clenched, confident of successfully carrying out their divine mission. In these visual representations, the leaders are perfect characters, completely fulfilling the traits of classical heroism, with no glimpse of what would be considered human imperfections, but rather highlighting divine heroism.

The leaders represented can fascinate and excite their potential voters, who place part of their hopes in the heroic traits of these characters. The call to adventure of these heroes is therefore divine, as in the folkloric tradition of folktales. The four leaders must confront the enemies of their countries in order to restore the lost/at risk order. That order is at risk because of the effects of multiculturalism, gender ideology or the pattern of progressive politics in general. Charismatic leaders become a form of mediation between order and disorder, and present themselves with their divine traits as the only ones capable of maintaining this balance of coexistence.

Despite the diversity of ways of constructing the heroicity of each of these characters, in the construction of their electoral narratives, these heroes emphasise a saint-renouncing narrative, trying to prioritise a model that highlights the nobility of their actions. The super-heroes are in these images making a proposal of salvation, greater than themselves: to save their countries through electoral conquest but in a salvationist and divine rhetoric, which justifies their journeys, which presents them as altruistic leaders who undertake a journey into an inhospitable political space to save what they consider the “good citizenship”. It is only through their struggle that they could win in the face of an apocalyptic Armageddon caused by their enemies.

Thus, these images represent part of the morphology of the folkloric narrative, and the construction of these charismatic heroes is part of the process of persuasive domination of the political and ideological project of the Latin American far-right. Heroes sought to personify myths and desires, seeking a symbolic efficacy characteristic of shamanism: to regenerate and resituate their constituents in a social structure from which they would feel stigmatised, and the figure of Superman would bestow confidence, understanding and companionship.

3.2 The shine of celebrity: Marvel's far-right



Figure 2: Political leaders show shine (Source: Pinterest/Memedroid, assembled by the authors)

As a complement to the divinisation and to further connote and accentuate its meaning, the images of the Latin American far-right share the representation of their leaders as celebrities (Figure 2). The construction of this celebrity is observed in different ways: The leaders are again compared to Marvel superheroes. The use of these superheroes is relevant as they were created as a graphic and audiovisual response to the fascisms of the 20th century. As the illustrator Spiegel points out, these heroes were part of the Golden Age that began in the 1940s, when the construction of comic book heroes emerged as graphic figures with which to combat fascism through few words and violent actions (cf. Spiegelmann 2019).

The construction of the heroism of the contemporary far-right involves the image as a form of contribution to prosaic fiction. But paradoxically, if these characters were historically associated with the anti-fascist battle, today it is a far-right with proto-fascist traits that employs their figures as the corporealisation of the Marvel celebrity.

In the images we observe some characters of the Brazilian Bolsonaroist electoral bloc, as well as the Peruvian president Vizcarra. The leaders are again represented in a fusion that reincarnates them in the fictional character. The construction of these heroes as celebrity figures also involves fame, that is, public recognition, and this recognition is again combined in the recognition of the fantastic figures they represent, fusing the very senses of the real figure with the fantastic figure. In this way, political leaders are symbolically endowed with the capacities that the images illustrate: the ability to control elements such as fire, water or gravity, providing

them with the political legitimation to exercise social control in their divine attributions. These divine attributions are also expressed by a specific feature present in all the images: shine.

Shine is central to the construction of these leaders as celebrities. The leaders accept through shine the divine call, a call that has the connotations of galactic and divine mythology, but which is materialised in the call to be part of the narrative universe of the media (cf. Bayarri/Fernández-Villanueva 2023). The brightness can be seen as a hyperbole of the chromatic representation, in line with the other mechanisms of exaggeration that accompany the imaginary creation of mythical heroes. In addition to the brightness, the mobility, the impression of activity and the hypertrophied movement subliminally aimed at defensive and violent action are also exaggerated. The images suggest that the transformation of these political leaders into celebrities takes place through two mechanisms: through bodily fusion into comic-book heroes who have previously acquired fame, and through violent eccentricity: The leaders, in such fusion, appropriate objects that represent the punitive logic they advocate, such as fists, weapons, shields and armour, all of which legitimise violence as well as constructing elements of a kind of eccentric and violent fame that propels them to public recognition.

The construction of the cult of far-right leaders transformed into celebrities gives them a glamour, that is, a special charm that justifies the actions and rhetoric of these leaders in emotional and not necessarily rational terms.



**Figure 3: Political leaders manifest traits of hyperkinesis
(Source: Pinterest/Memedroid, assembled by the authors)**

Political leaders are presented as hyperkinetic figures, with athletic muscles that leave human anatomy behind. The montages of photographs with various facial expressions of the political leaders cause a distortion of the original inexpressiveness of the Marvel heroes. In these images,

on the one hand, the accelerated and dynamic movement of the heroes can be observed in the overexposure of elements and lighting (as can be seen in the lower images representing the ultra-right-wing Kast and the Peruvian president Vizcarra) in comparison to the fixed representations, which transform the politician into the amulet: the toy representing the Paraguayan president Abdo. The images are different, with some showing a more dynamic character and others a more static one. Nevertheless, they all share traits of bellicosity.

While the Golden Age of comic book superheroes had its high point in the culture industry of the 1940s, the contemporary far-right reclaims these traits of super-heroics, revived in the audiovisual industry. The images articulate a particular idiosyncrasy as they attempt to break down the boundaries between the fictional hero with comic book DNA and the real political character.

3.3 Physical strength, bravery and authoritarianism: violent masculinity



Figure 4: The leaders are presented as violent and masculine heroes
(Source: Pinterest/Memedroid, assembled by the authors)

The heroism of Latin American far-right leaders reflects a masculine worldview, in which the use of force and physical violence are the mechanisms of conflict resolution. The image above left shows Bolsonaro knocking down a soldier. Bolsonaro is presented as a muscular, young, armed character who wins in battle by showing off part of his body. The message reads “Make Brazil great again”, alluding to the ideological ties between Trumpism and Bolsonarismo.

The top right image shows Paraguayan President Abdo in front of some Marvel Comics characters. The masculine strength of his figure comes from his executive suit, his upright posture

and his presidential bow, representing the power of authority and hierarchy. Abdo stands in front of other characters, but he does not require muscularity to exert his masculinity, but rather the decisions of status with which he is presented through his clothes. Abdo is positioned above the other characters, but he does not require musculature to exercise his masculinity. His status, compared to the various fantastic characters, is determined by his clothes. Also, Abdo gets part of his masculinity just because he is standing in front of these characters, via conceptual mapping.

Finally, at the bottom are images of the ultra-Chilean Kast, depicted as the Marvel character Captain America. Kast was also presented with a reproduction of the character's shield model, building a bridge between the fictional character and the real one. Kast thus acquires a magical element that reconstructs in his character the elements of the superhero Captain America. Kast would be indestructible, which would allow him to exercise a masculine violence against his "enemies", and transmit a relief to his followers, as their hero would be invulnerable.

Through their bodies, the images show a corporeality with direct links to masculinity that emphasises physical strength, readiness for confrontation and the use of power. Corporeality and aggressive manhood are vehicles that make it possible to identify these actors with this particular heroism. The parameters of force that represent this form of heroism are physical force, authoritarian force, and symbolic force.

3.4 Armed militarism



Figure 5: The leaders are militarised (Source: Pinterest/Memedroid, assembled by the authors)

The political project of the Latin American far-right is structured around a militarist organisation and support, understood not only in terms of armed and military symbolism, but also in terms of the hierarchical structure of the construction of the Latin American social order. These images reflect the attachment to militarism through the clothing and body positions of different political leaders.

In the upper left corner, Bolivian Senator Añez is again depicted as a Marvel character, with the power to transform her arms into flames, and with the message “Captain Bolivia”. Añez is one of the few representations of women in the heroic memes of the Latin American far-right. The image balances the military expression of the captain, giving her rank and decision-making authority, with the perception of her female body, which is exalted through an outfit that emphasises the stereotypical female figure.

In the upper right image, Brazilian President Bolsonaro can be seen with the body of a military hero, and the montage reads a phrase of his: “The soldier who goes to war and is afraid of dying is a coward”. Bolsonaro thus expresses his warlike perception of politics, and would be saying that it is through confrontation in conflict that conflicts are resolved and managed. Through a similar montage, in the lower left image Bolsonaro appears in a muscular soldier’s body, and around him a series of messages that would complement his militaristic logic, such as “honour and homeland”.

Finally, at the bottom right, the ultra-Chilean Kast is again shown, now understood as “Captain Kast”. Militarism is an element of heroism that legitimises violence through the defence of a repressive-punitive logic (cf. Montoya 2018), normalising and justifying it on the basis of a series of moral precepts that are aesthetically demarcated, principally in the use of arms and armour. The presence of rifles and shields is constant, as well as often showing armed extensions of the body, such as arm-blades, flamethrowers and iron fists.

Moreover, the militarised hero will be in charge of transmitting a rhetoric of defence to the punitive-repressive principle of conflict resolution against the “enemy”. Militarism is central to the extent that the rhetoric (also aesthetic) of the Latin American far-right demarcates a clear frontier of political identification: us vs. them, us vs. the enemy. It is on the basis of this demarcated border that violence, in its militarised form, is justified.

3.5 Humorous dehumanisation of the enemy



Figure 6: The leaders use humour to trivialise violence
(Source: Pinterest/Memedroid, assembled by the authors)

The final element that constitutes our concept of memetic heroism is humour as a mechanism for legitimising violence and dehumanising the enemy. While in the previous section we focused on the main representations of superheroism, we now turn to a series of images that have a different plasticity. The most representative is the lower right image, which depicts Peruvian President Vizcarra as a humorous comic book hero. If the images in the previous section reflected the super-human traits of the heroes through the influence of fantastic comics, now we find visual elements that highlight exaggeration, two dimensions and ridicule as self-recognition of imperfections.

Similarly, the lower left image depicts Vizcarra as a Superman pitted against the sum of political parties, who are understood not as adversaries but as enemies. These political parties are embodied in a dangerous monster that comes to life because it would represent their joint corruption.

The upper images establish the link with humour in another way: Both offer the aesthetic elements of the fantastic comic described above; however, the superimpositions of the images of the political leaders compose a mosaic that by their positions offer humour and mockery. The upper left image shows the ultra-Chilean Kast transformed into Captain America, but his combat is against an opposition leader whose round, hairless head has been coloured red to bring him closer to hell. Kast represents the aesthetics of the masculine hero, while his enemy represents communism as a lesser, obese and therefore ridiculable being. Finally, the upper right image depicts Paraguayan President Abdo as Superman, with heroic traits, but which provoke mockery and sarcasm because of the representation of a political enemy, who is dehumanised in the body of a tick.

While the plasticity is reminiscent of action-adventure comics, the superimposition provokes the mockery of the enemy, reinforced by the interspersed message of “we take up the struggle of good against evil”. Dehumanisation through images, characteristic of fascism and Nazism, possesses the elements of the graphic culture described. During the 20th century, Nazism and fascism used the transformation into insects to establish the logic of ethnic and racial supremacy, justifying the employment of the gas chambers. The use of physical extermination techniques is similar to those used with insect plagues. In the contemporary far-right, this influence can be observed in order to dehumanise an enemy that is constructed more broadly: in the case of this image, the political enemy.

Thus, humour, mockery, sarcasm and irony make it easier to legitimise violence against sectors of the population. In the images collected, the language of appeal to the us-them dichotomy is made explicit through humorous superimpositions. In the other images, heroism is constructed by highlighting the bodily elements of the individual, not the contextual ones, and not in the comparison, as it is through humorous language that this dichotomy is normalised and assumed in a natural way.

4 Discussion: the legitimisation of memetic hero violence in the Latin American far-right

The images collaborate in the consolidation of these political figures as a powerful anti-depressant (cf. Hochschild 2016) capable of resolving individual affective symptoms and constructing new collective ones. Heroes offer in their adventurous journey a cure against ills. The hero as Superman integrates the sympathiser into a structure that reconciles the passivity of the sympathiser with the activity and the heroic overflow. In this complementarity, the cure for illness emerges, and hero and sympathiser can establish a system of passages from one to the other, creating a coherence of the psychic-narrative universe between the two, which allows the hero to embody traits of the sympathiser, as well as the sympathiser to embody the divine traits of the charismatic Superman. This system of affectivities generates a concrete projection of the social universe, allowing the creation of desires and expectations, and these desires and expectations justify the use of violence by this salvationist and divine heroism.

According to the historical studies referred to above (cf. Michalowski 2008; Vidal 2014), the divinisation of leaders had the function of making the subjects feel strong and achieving their identification with the leader. At the same time, they refer to a universe of fantasies and desires that can channel collective action towards new or different destinations. Leaders who suggest or preach that they are following a supernatural or messianic mission tend to have authoritarian attitudes and proclaim unquestionable truths against which it is not possible to oppose. This gives rise to the construction of enemies and the legitimisation of violence against those who hold divergent values and ideas. This is a phenomenon that acquires an extreme character in sects (cf. Álvarez 2019) but can be shared by other violent and destructive political leaderships.

Several historians point out that both the Nazi and Stalinist regimes represent a new political system based on the artificial construction of leaders as **mythical heroes** and their cult or divinisation (cf. Kershaw/Lewin 2012). It should be noted that the divinisation and cult of the main leaders gave rise to an excessive concentration of power and also to the cult of other small local leaders, loyal to the supreme dictator. The relationship between this process of divinisation and

cult and violence can also be seen in the history of these systems. Magic and rituals, as well as their opposite, the demonisation of enemies seen “everywhere”, are archaic ingredients that recur in the most destructive and inadequate regimes (cf. Kershaw 2022).

The hyperbolisation of leaders often accompanied the mythologisation of the peoples and countries of the violent, leading to the construction of clearly false or hypertrophied myths and narratives about the greatness and value of one’s ancestors and culture to the detriment of the value of the supposed opposites.

Superman’s youthful naivety was part of his historical appeal, as he invited young people into a new kind of storytelling, especially suitable for children, whose fantasies were even more devoid of logic than most prose fiction, all presented with diagrammatic visuals in primary and secondary colours that could make every page a stage curtain on which to antagonistically combat the enemy. Present-day depictions of far-right leaders re-signify the heroic characters of popular culture by substituting the original villains for their present-day enemies. The muscular, physically powerful bodies, the readiness for confrontation and the “bravery” and use of power, physical or symbolic, are the meanings of the heroism that legitimises violence. The militaristic images, in which the colour green and the presence of weapons, real or imaginary, are also accentuated, emphasise confrontation and the war metaphor as forms of conflict resolution. And, in a complementary way, by showing contempt and devaluation, they describe people who opt for non-militarised forms of conflict resolution as cowards.

Finally, the legitimisation of violence is completed by two supplementary processes: 1) the creation of fictitious enemies and the attribution to political opponents of an equally mythologised and artificially dangerous power (cf. Westlake 2018), and 2) the dehumanisation of the enemy (cf. Haslam 2006). The politics of creating enemies, and consequently fear, is facilitated by polarisation, a phenomenon that has increased in all European far-right parties in the first decade of the 21st century (cf. Sánchez de Dios 2020). The far-right parties have accentuated nativism (cf. Mudde 2019), ultra-nationalism (cf. Griffin 2018), rejection of integration policies (cf. Gómez-Martínez/Moral-Jiménez 2018) and gender equality rights (anti-feminism) (cf. Köttig/Bitzan/Petö 2017).

As Haslam (2006, 2013) points out, dehumanisation takes two main forms: animalisation and mechanisation. In the scenes of enemies confronted by heroes and celebrities, these two prototypes are found, introducing deformities, animal traits, monsters or robots. This is an explicit dehumanisation (cf. Kteily et al. 2015; Dietze/Roth 2020) although realised through informal or humorous images. In addition to this explicit animalisation, subtle dehumanisation can be observed, which consists of attributing negative traits such as cowardice, dirtiness, deformity, madness or stupidity. These traits are more difficult to perceive but they act in the same direction of negatively categorising the different in order to prepare the legitimisation of violence against them.

Despite the positive and supportive narrative of historical heroes, the acts performed by them often contain considerable doses of violence, always justified in the pursuit of a higher moral order. Violence acted out or induced by heroes and leaders is often legitimised not only when it is executed, but also afterwards, once victory has been achieved. Various commemorative acts, paintings, statues, and other symbolic forms recall and reinforce the justification of

violence. The exaltation of heroes and the concealment of the damage they cause occur mainly in times contemporary to the victory, in a context of social support, which are only re-signified afterwards. The loss of legitimacy is associated with the display of negative traits hidden during the glorification period.

Heroism often has a dark side consisting basically of two traits: 1) the excessive valuation, divinisation or idealisation that is later re-evaluated and 2) the concealment of the violent character, which during the glorification period is an interpretative distortion. Despite the fact that many violent actions are concealed or classified as fallacies, it is worth noting that the concept of heroism we have outlined highlights violent elements as not only legitimate but desirable mechanisms in political action. And it is through the representation of a war metaphor that the narrative universe of these far-right-wing heroes is constituted.

If the various studies on the heroicity of European fascism show the hypervaluation of aggressive elements, the present analysis not only reaffirms the existence of such hypervaluation in the different classifications we have detected, but we also add the post-colonial context to detect the construction of the political enemy, originating in the historically demarcated social and power order.

Although the playful figures of the Marvel and DC comic companies are mainly aimed at young people, their power of influence may be broader, extending to a wide target group of sympathisers who identify with these characteristics, subliminally linked to power and violence. Specular identification with fictional characters operates in children and adults and fulfils interesting psychological functions that induce them to fixate on them, to imitate behaviour and to send feelings and emotions towards them (Fernández-Villanueva/Revilla/Domínguez 2011). Thus, they can exert functions of political use, such as attention and preferential value and social influence with a wide variety of populations.

5 Conclusion

Memes are distinguished by the fact that they are collective works. People often receive an image and add elements that they find attractive to reinforce the imaginary that they want to convey. Our research cannot detect whether there is an initial image that has been reproduced later, as the degree of manipulation and alteration of the images is high. Nevertheless, our research allows us to affirm that there is a high degree of influence among a form of digital activism that reproduces these images with fidelity, finding enormous similarities between the elements that are represented.

The elements marked by works by authors such as Casanova, highlighting his book *Europe against Europe* (2011), are shared in the context of Latin American memetic representations, highlighting the violent culture to achieve political ends and the aesthetic features described in the analysis. Thus, the discursive keys of twentieth-century authoritarian representations are intensely inherited by representations of heroism of the contemporary far-right.

These authoritarian movements highlighted their heroes and hypervalued their aggressiveness, resistance to pain and defeat. Their most representative leaders exercised, permitted and justified violence against others. Moreover, they exercised a socialising function of violence. They were deified and loved, acting as models of action that allowed other collectives to be hated.

The influences of this authoritarian rhetoric on the memetic communication analysed are evident, legitimising the annulment of and violence against opponents. If through heroism the Latin American far-right disguises hatred, dehumanisation and violence, we ask ourselves the important question: Would it not be more appropriate to describe them as inciters of violence rather than heroes?

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