

Make Argentina Liberal Again

An analysis on value, elites and political practices

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1. Introduction

During the last few years, *liberals* appear to have made a notorious breakthrough in Argentinian politics: as prominent *referentes*¹ starring in diverse media became popular figures, young people began identifying as liberals up to a scale unseen since the beginning of the 1980s, with an intense process of creating and reorganizing *liberal* political parties set in motion. While the movement appears to grow rapidly in visibility and influence, new actors and ideas gain momentum, simultaneously triggering interpersonal frictions, ambitions and questions regarding how *liberals* should proceed. This work analyzes the intertwining between values, morality and politics in the practices and relations displayed by *liberals*, as an elite group, set against a context of relevant changes for the liberal movement.

Making the field

Originally, the research project that resulted in this work sought to approach topics of politics and morality but with a partially different scope. There, I meant to focus on a recently created *liberal* political party, Partido Mejorar, to study the relations between liberal and conservative actors as part of ongoing displacements in the Argentinian right-wing (Morresi et al., 2021). Shortly after the beginning of fieldwork, it became apparent that the processes I intended to address could hardly be fruitfully analyzed by exclusively attending activities of Mejorar and its members. It turned out that the political practices by the actors I observed could only be grasped in relation to the activities of a larger set of individuals and institutions that identified as *liberal*. The members of Mejorar, especially its leaders, it turned out, regularly participated in events organized by *liberal* organizations, discussed the actions (and shared the contents) of other *liberals*, which was perceived as relevant for defining the party's own strategic plans, and sought recognition by those actors. Through this dialogue with the actors and their practices, the field was dialectically constructed (Madden, 2010).

It soon became evident that *liberal* was not only a category with which certain actors identified, as it stood for certain principles, but often it also referred to those who were part of a self-conscious group. However, certain actors identified as 'liberals', but they were not recognized as part of that group by most *liberals* -and frequently neither did they seek that recognition, even though there were mutual connections among them. In this sense, as the word "liberal" was in everybody's mouth, it became important to disentangle different uses of this category that were related to different actors.

1 A *referente* is an individual perceived by others as someone who expresses their views (political or intellectual) and that they respect. Unlike 'leader' [*líder*] a *referente* might not be in control of any group. Moreover, 'leader', in political contexts, has a connotation that *liberals* often despise as somehow related to authoritarian figures.

On the one hand, as a noun, I came to see *liberals* as a relatively cohesive set of people that a) identify as *liberals* and are usually recognized as such by others, b) express themselves and act in terms of shared values (referred to as *the ideas of liberty*), c) are aware of their commonalities, d) hold relatively similar historical, political and philosophical views, e) often present similarities regarding their training and education and f) crucially, are part of, or strongly connected to, certain national, regional and transnational networks of *liberal* institutions, such as think tanks or certain universities. Ultimately, I will argue, *liberals* constitute an elite group. As an adjective, *liberal* refers to what is accepted as being so by this group, which highly correlates to the diverse currents some authors have identified as ‘neoliberal’ (i.e. Morresi, 2008; Plehwe, 2009), and excludes other liberal currents²³.

On the other hand, by ‘liberal’ I also refer to a more ambiguous political identity that gathers individuals with heterogeneous characteristics, and which do not necessarily constitute a cohesive group. In chapter three, I will argue that a ‘liberal’ fringe is, to some extent, a necessary result of how *liberals* conceive and produce their political practices. However, this should not lead to the belief that ‘liberals’ lack agency or that they are subject to the other group. On the contrary, ‘liberal’ *referentes* hold their own views, political ambitions, and while pursuing them may confront with *liberals*.

The wider collective that encompasses both *liberals* and ‘liberals’ constitutes what I have named, in the absence of an established term, ‘the liberal movement’. I opted for the term ‘movement’ because of its connotation of flexibility, given its porous character, and the dynamic identification carried out by many actors. Further, the notion of ‘movement’ points to this object’s heterogeneity, not only regarding ideological differences, but also about the sorts of actors (think tanks, political parties, lecturers, youtubers) and practices these carry out. Occasionally, this category was used by the observed actors themselves, but this was rather rare.⁴

Liberals and ‘liberals’ are connected through multiple relations and may rely on each other for the advancement of their political views and personal ambitions. However, their relations may fuel frictions both between them, as well as within each of these groups. Some further comments shall be made regarding this conceptualization.

2 See chapter 2.

3 I do not intend to lessen the diversity within this elite group, which includes individuals that hold profound, and heavily debated, ideological differences. However, they a) resort to the same values, ideas and references to process these positions, even when it comes to their differences, and, b) may discuss their actions in terms of this common identity.

4 Regarding the actors that compose this movement, it shall be noted that both regarding *liberals* and ‘liberals’ these were overwhelming male. In terms of social background, the observed *liberal* actors regularly were professionals (usually in economics, finance or business administration) with experience at corporations or as consultants. While ‘liberals’ appeared to be a more heterogeneous collective, in the observations I carried out, middle-class university students or young graduates seemed to prevail.

Boundaries in relation to this group were porous in different ways. Inclusion in (and exclusion from) the *liberal* elite appeared as possible, even beyond what seems to be the most common recruitment mechanisms. In a different sense, actors interact in a complex social world in which, situationally, they may adopt (or emphasize) different identities, or may even be part of 'different movements' (Gluckman, 1940). For example, Mejorar is a *liberal* party, and is considered to be one by *liberals*; but its *referentes* not only identify as *liberals*, but may also stress their republicanism and act according to partially different frames. In addition, the recognition (or not) of the *liberal* character of someone was not always an uncomplicated matter: in the context of fieldwork, characterized by transformations and frictions, what makes a *liberal* and what *liberals* should do was constantly under discussion.

The constant relations between the most eminent Argentinian *liberals* with their counterparts in other Latin American countries, as well as United States and some European countries, lead me to conceive *liberals* as a group constituted by actors operating on different scales, ranging from the local to the global. In fact, it could be stated that the group I studied is not nationally bounded⁵. However, for the sake of clarity, by *liberals* I will refer to the studied group on a national scale, unless specified otherwise. Nonetheless, the relations between diverse scales (national, regional, global) are a central feature in the organization and reproduction of the *liberal* elite, as I will argue in chapter 3. Moreover, their actions through these multi-scaled networks are crucial in the *liberals*' social representations of their own group, for example, regarding their cosmopolitanism (Eriksen, 2016)⁶.

Methods

Therefore, the task of studying the liberal movement involved relevant challenges regarding the process of construction of a complex field. In this process, an emergent and extended phenomenon revealed itself as helpful to *partially* reconstruct the systems of differences that structure their relations: conflict. As stated by Marcus (1995, 110) 'following the parties to conflicts (...) In the more complex public spheres of contemporary societies, this technique is a much more central, organizing principle for multi-sited ethnography'. Following conflicts and frictions, as well as other practices, became a critical technique to map the liberal movement as field of relations, ethnographically reconstructing the actors and practices that the observed individuals conceived as relevant. Through this process, the

5 Further from 'exchanges via the internet and borrowing on the level of symbols and discursive strategies', Pasiaka (2017, S22) called to focus 'on actors engaged in cross-border networks' for the study of right-wing politics.

6 Plus, scale-making practices by this group, for example, through their defense of global free markets, may also be related to this transnational forms of organization. As stated by Tsing (2005, 58) 'Scale is the spatial dimensionality necessary for a particular kind of view (...) scale is not just a neutral frame for viewing the world; scale must be brought into being: proposed, practiced'.

multi-sited field was produced as ‘a network composed of fixed and moving points including spaces, people, and objects’ (Burrell, 2009, 189) both offline and online. This construction of the field, which gathered diverse actors, as *liberal* academics, politicians and ‘liberal’ communicators, is inextricably related to the analytical proposal of this thesis.

It is relevant to stress the partial character of this reconstruction, as the conducted observations and interviews mainly focused on the practices by *liberals* and ‘liberals’ actively meant to ‘overcome Argentina’s decadence’ -which were classified by the actors in terms of *politics* (chiefly aimed towards government) and the *cultural battle* (related to the transformation of the society's predominant values and ideas). As a consequence, I mostly observed public and semi-public practices and events. In this sense, for example, *liberals* whose activities were chiefly related to the corporate, financial or software development sector were rarely part of my observations, and will not be analyzed in this work, even though some observations pointed towards these sectors as areas of relevant activity by that group.

For this research, I conducted fieldwork at activities of the Mejorar party between December 2019 and December 2020⁷, as well as participation at diverse events and interactions by other actors of the liberal movement, including think tanks, political parties, communicators (youtubers and influencers), among others. I registered party meetings and public interventions, debates, conferences, live streamings, lectures, demonstrations, tributes, among different types of activities.

On the one hand, while mapping the liberal movement I sought to document the practices of individuals and institutions according to their apparent centrality for the actors themselves. On the other hand, I sought to conduct at least some observations of a wide range of actors within the liberal movement, with the aim of drawing up the systems of differences that structured their relations via comparison (Balbi, 2015; Bateson, 2015). This proved to be very relevant for the research as, in a context of emergent frictions and competition, these differences were often actively exposed and even consciously stressed by the actors. Further, regarding traditional ethnographic data-production techniques, besides fieldwork observations and systematic comparison, I also developed semi-structured interviews with members of Mejorar (both *referentes* and not) and the representative of a relevant institution in the *liberal* network in Argentina (Spradley, 1979).

As diverse actors were observed, the particularities of the practices and forms of organization by these implied that a variety of data-collection techniques had to be conducted, besides in person observations. I have already mentioned the multi-scaled character of the *liberal* networks, which represents a challenge for an anthropological research, as global interconnectedness often cannot easily

⁷ With the exception of February and the first half of March.

be grasped through ethnographic methods – and frequently so is the case regarding access to studies of elites (Nader, 1972). Thus, as mentioned by Eriksen's (2016), it was necessary to supplement traditional ethnographic methods for studying processes in a globalized context. In respect to this, besides relying in the existent literature, I carried out observations in digital contexts (i.e. conferences, debates), reconstructed the main historical trajectories of these networks in Argentina, and analyzed and classified secondary sources (such as online publications, books, websites, among others).

Also, certain *referentes*, such as 'liberal' communicators, intensely interacted online with their audiences and other actors of the liberal movement; and the practices by young 'liberals' were often strongly related to online interactions (i.e. in social media). The ubiquity of digital media in everyday life was, even more so, particularly relevant for actors of the liberal movement who both engaged in discussions among themselves, and used digital platforms as part of their efforts in the *cultural battle*. Thus, digital ethnography techniques were, from the beginning, a crucial aspect of the research methods, since diverse social media were already a key part of the interactions of the individuals I worked with. In relation to this, I adopted a non-digital-centred (Pink et al., 2016) approach to these interactions, understanding the digital as a constitutive part of human experience (Miller & Horst, 2012)(Miller and Horst 2012). I did not seek to understand the usage of each sort of media/platform (Youtube, Twitter, Zoom, etc) on its own, but focused in how these diverse media were part of a common ecosystem, intrinsically connected to offline practices, inhabited by the studied subjects (Madianou & Miller, 2012).

However, from mid-March on, due to the Covid-19 pandemic, almost all fieldwork observations became digital -with a few, but insightful, exceptions. The pandemic occurred before relations with the subjects of the research could be constructed, implying that interpersonal bonding through 'deep hanging-out' would not become a major source of data. "In person" ethnography was mostly relegated to the conducted interviews and the physical observations at Mejorar activities which took place between October and December 2020 -and those previously done in December 2020 and January 2021.

On a brighter side, the Covid global pandemic, simultaneous to a context of local liberal heightened activity, sped up the displacement of many groups' activities towards online environments, which ultimately made these accessible for fieldwork. In the end, this constituted the bulk of data produced for this thesis. Importantly, not only did I have to move my activities online, but so did the actors, who also developed new activities during this period, such as daily interviews through Instagram Lives.

For better or for worse, the relevance of digital observations had noteworthy consequences for my work. It must be acknowledged that it led to a certain bias in the data production. The observed digital

events could be seen as over-representing *referentes*. Many of the activities I observed were conferences, interviews, lectures - formats in which participation is focused on specific individuals who hold certain recognition within the relevant group. A similar bias could be seen in the analysis of other materials, like *liberals'* participation in traditional media (papers, radio and television) and publications, such as books.

Some caveats shall be made in relation to this. It is worth noting that, especially at the beginning of the sanitary lockdown, these events proliferated up to the point at which there were at least a few more or less relevant activities occurring on a daily basis, mostly Instagram Lives and Zoom meetings. In this context, activities with individuals that were not necessarily *referentes*, but still somehow recognized, took place. More significantly, grass-roots activism is not particularly relevant among *liberal* practices, which are chiefly related to certain distinguished individuals⁸. This does not lessen the importance of producing data on individuals that are not necessarily *referentes*, something I actively pursued during fieldwork, but which becomes telling of how the political practices were conceived of by the actors themselves.

The centrality of *referentes* and the debates these put forward should not lead to confusion when it comes to the research object of this work, which is neither 'neoliberalism' nor some current of it. I do not aim here to analyze abstract philosophical, ideological systems, but the practices of *liberals* interacting in a specific context crossed by national, regional and global political processes.

Also, similar problems arose regarding 'liberals'. Unlike *liberals*, these do not constitute a cohesive group and neither are they collectively organized around certain institutions. Of course, there are some actors who could be seen as more relevant than others, but in general these constitute a very heterogeneous multi-centered collective. Even though this thesis is more attentive to *liberals*, their relations to 'liberals' (at least to some of them) appear as relevant in the current context. For example, the surge of individuals identifying as 'liberals', besides their heterogeneity, is constitutive of what *liberals* perceive as a political window of opportunity.

For the understanding of non-*referente* 'liberals', some interviews I conducted with young members of Mejorar were productive. Beyond that, non-*referentes* 'liberals' were mainly observed in their interactions on social media (Twitter, Instagram), and through their comments and questions at events on Youtube, Zoom, Instagram, and so on. This was not a trivial matter, since the liberal surge in recent times appears to be correlative of an enlarged visibility of their supporters in online environments. These environments are not only seen as a field for the *cultural battle*, but also a space in which social

⁸ A similar perspective could be derived from the existing bibliography on Argentinian *liberals* which usually focuses on discussions by/among *liberal* intellectuals.

ties are built among young people identified with liberalism⁹. The relative importance of these actors, whose actual names may not be public, and the commonalities in their ideas, interests and aspirations, were not always easy to determine. In these cases, following the underlying logic of fieldwork observations in general (Markham, 2013), online tokens of importance were useful for defining who and what to register: namely, followers, subscribers, received likes and shares, as well as specific interactions that denoted proximity to certain *liberal referentes*. Also, besides the relative relevance of individuals, the interaction between these users was significant, as it was part of the production of a shared (and disputed) universe of meaning. In this sense, recurrent ideas and criticism in online contexts were also documented regardless of the individual relevance of its issuers.

Moreover, I faced an analogous difficulty in my fieldwork at Mejorar. Often it was hard to determine the actual role in the party of some of the most active members of the party's Whatsapp group. This was even more significant as the views of these participants regularly clashed with those of the party's authorities and other members that I actually knew. Those interactions were interesting when it came to understanding the tensions between this party's positions and a section of its base, which might be attracted to it but often voiced their inclinations towards more intransigent or reactionary positions.

Limitations

In addition to the aforementioned challenges, I may observe other limitations and difficulties that the present work faces. A significant limitation is related to the relative paucity of literature on the subject. There is a profound, and growing, corpus of studies on liberals in Argentina regarding the 20th century - usually approached in terms of the 'neoliberal' or 'liberal-conservative' intellectuals (Beltrán, 2005; Canelo, 2001, 2008; de Büren, 2020; Haidar, 2017; Heredia, 2001, 2002, 2004; Llamazares Valduvico, 1995; Morresi, 2009, 2007; Morresi & Vicente, 2020; Nallim, 2014; Vicente, 2009, 2012; Zimmermann, 1992, among others). These publications mostly approach the subject from a historical perspective, focusing on the roles played by certain liberal/liberal-conservative/neoliberal 'intellectuals', or their discussions regarding the political and economic issues of those times. As such, they provided this research with an indispensable historical perspective.

However, literature on *liberals* in the first two decades of the 21st century appears to be scarce. There are a few, but insightful, works on the 'liberal' youth, liberalism/libertarianism and the right-wing politics in Argentina, some of them not necessarily academic but journalistic or of political

9 Interview with a young member of Mejorar.

analysis (Elman, 2018; Goldentul & Saferstein, 2020; Morresi et al., 2021; Morresi & Vicente, 2021; Stefanoni, 2021)

Also, there are some publications on the Latin American ‘right’, which sometimes refer to the transnational networks of ‘neoliberal’ think tanks (Cannon, 2016; Fischer & Plehwe, 2017; Giordano et al., 2018; Giordano & Soler, 2015; Grassetti & Prego, 2017; Luna & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2014; Mato, 2007; Plehwe & Fischer, 2019; Prego, 2016). These publications provided relevant inputs for understanding the larger scales in which *liberals* establish connections and conceive of their actions; but most of them focus in larger ‘mainstream right’ political forces, and their contribution to understanding Argentinian *liberals* was rather limited.

Interestingly, the referred publications regarding liberals are marked by the contributions of sociologists and political scientists, but I could not find any work by anthropologists. This vacancy is quite curious considering the continuous, and century-old, questioning by anthropology of the presuppositions of the liberal tradition, often deemed a sort of ‘provincial universalism’, as well as studies on ‘neoliberalism’. As a consequence, this work explores an area of relative vacancy, in particular inside of anthropology.

The exploratory character of the present work lead to the encounter of significant obstacles, as *liberals* and the liberal movement as an object were not (and could not have been) mapped out in all its dimensions, and neither was it possible to easily reconstruct this complexity through the existent literature. I nevertheless made a deliberate decision to pursue *liberals*, and their political practices, as the ultimate object of this study. *Liberals* appear as the social group in relation to which the observed actions make sense. Had I tried to isolate and focus on that which seems to be a more manageable object (for example, the Mejorar party), this work could have productively addressed other questions, but not the ongoing frictions and transformations in the Argentinian liberal movement. I consider that re-embedding Mejorar in the larger social context of the liberal movement was a condition both for a better understanding of Mejorar itself and of the frictions and disputes between *liberals* that could be observed through the party activities. Furthermore, hopefully the analysis of those dynamics might be useful for reflecting on processes in other contexts.

Another limitation of the present work is related to my insufficient familiarity with the *liberal* bibliography. In light of the relevance that my interlocutors assigned to certain intellectuals (i.e., Friedrich Von Hayek, Ludwig Von Mises, Murray Rothbard, among others), it would have been productive if I had developed an equally competitive knowledge of the referenced literature. Moreover, I believe that this would have been useful to shed light on some of the internal frictions among *liberals*.

Last but not least, the work's extension was a noteworthy obstacle. Originally, a fifth of the work, was devoted to the analysis of the *cultural battle*. There I argued that through these practices *liberals* a) reproduced, and legitimized, themselves as an elite, connecting past, present and future; b) constructed an antagonism against 'populism' conceived in terms not only of moral and intellectual inequality, but also discontinuity, c) and that this definition of the antagonism was crucial for organizing their relations with other groups -specially allowing for alliances with right-wing actors to 'rescue the republic' from a 'totalitarian' threat. In this version, some of these aspects will be hinted at *en passant* but not developed and, as a consequence, the dialogue that I seek to establish with certain anthropological studies on the right-wing will remain tacit – but for a brief comment in the conclusions.

Conceptual frame

Elites

Liberals, as a self-conscious group connected and reproduced through transnational networks that articulate academic, political and business sectors, thereby constituting an elite.

"An elite is a collectivity of persons who occupy commanding positions in some important sphere of social life, and who share a variety of interests arising from similarities of training, experience, public duties and way of life. To promote these interests, they seek to cooperate and coordinate their actions by means of a corporate organization" (Cohen, 1981, xvi)

According to anthropologists Salverda and Abbink (Abbink & Salverda, 2013, 1) "elites are dominant in some sector of society on the basis of certain (im)material characteristics, skills, and achievements". Regarding this dominance, Cohen (1981) observes that elites have to fulfill both universalistic and particularistic functions to reproduce themselves as such. Firstly, to legitimize themselves, elites must effectively present their skills and actions as beneficial and necessary to society in general. Secondly, their reproduction as a group implies the satisfaction of needs internal to the group, such as the development of practices that differentiate it from the masses, or the establishment of courses for the material and symbolical reproduction of its members. These universalistic and particularistic factors can mutually affect each other dialectically. In relation to this, Cohen holds that the organizational problems of an elite are mainly related to the contradiction between their universalistic and particularistic functions.

In formally egalitarian societies as that of this research, elites tend to objectify their (supposed) exceptional character through symbols that mystify it. This mystic character is usually referred to in terms of its "nobility", "culture", "refinement", "excellence", and is manifested in observable patterns of symbolic behavior which includes manners, etiquette and other traits that make up the group's

lifestyle (Cohen 1981). In this work, I will often refer to this symbolic behavior in terms of the *distinction* projected (and claimed) by *liberals* in their practices (Bourdieu, 1996). In this case, symbols are related to an elite culture which strongly seeks to emphasize, among other values, the actors' moral and intellectual superiority.

Furthermore, this symbolic behavior that mystifies the elite's exceptionality may be a cornerstone in the practices of exclusion that limit the entrance of 'outsiders' to the elite group on the basis of informal requisites (Cohen, 1981; Courtois, 2013). Shore (2002) underlines that elites can only be meaningfully understood in their wider historical context. In this sense, I will try to reconstruct significant aspects of this process of historical production at the end of this chapter. Moreover, the relevance of embracing a historic perspective is related to the processual character of elites, existing in perpetual change in relation with other groups and processes that occupy regional, national and transnational scales (Abbink & Salverda, 2013; Bourgoin, 2013).

Moral and values

The perspective assumed in this work is compatible to Fassin's (2012) proposal of a 'moral anthropology', which implies that moral questions are observed as embedded in the substance of the social, not as discrete entities that may be separated from the other spheres of human activities.¹⁰ Thus, the frame I adopt is concerned with the moral making of the world, specifically in that relative to the political practices and relations established by the *liberals*.

I also draw on Fernando Balbi's understanding of moral as an inherent aspect of human behavior related to "the formulation and display of socially effective representations about the, simultaneously, desirable and obligatory character of certain courses of action, social relations, institutional arrangements" (Balbi, 2016, 50–51)¹¹. These formulations or representations are produced by socially embedded subjects in the continuous process of their cooperative (and disputed) creation of the social world. As intrinsically intertwined with how the world is experienced, the moral is then part of cognition itself.

These insights hold two critical consequences for my approach. On the one hand, that which is conceived of as moral for a social group is not crystallized, but part of a continuous social process of production and reproduction connected to the *relative* desirability and obligatoriness of certain courses of action (Balbi, 2007). On the other hand, moral considerations are a constitutive aspect of the

10 It is worth noting that *liberals* usually present their values as based on a superior 'domain of ideas'. This native perspective should not be confused with the preferred theoretical approach.

11 This, as all translations from Spanish to English in this work (bibliographical and fieldwork-related), were done by myself.

appropriation of the social world, which implies that every human conduct entails certain form of 'morally informed pragmatism' (Balbi, 2017).

At this point, the notion of values will be crucial for understanding the relations between individual motivation and social reproduction. David Graeber (2001) proposes to understand social systems as creative action structures, and value as the way in which people measure the importance of the actions within such structures. In this sense, value would ultimately be related to actions, not things, perceived as important by a group. However, values are not only related to what people desire, but to what they *should* desire within a group (Graeber, 2001) -hence its relatively obligatory character. As a consequence, "reproducing society is not, normally, seen as an end in itself. Rather, most people pursue social values in more or less concrete form" (Graeber 2001:76). The pursuit of this social value requires a certain degree of intentionality and planning.

Further, regarding the *relative* character of the desirability or obligatoriness of certain courses of action, Joel Robbins states that cultural values may be taken as "conceptions that arrange other cultural elements (such as cultural ideas about persons, kinds of actions, things, etc.) into hierarchies of better and worse or more and less desirable. (...) These kinds of bald hierarchical statements are in turn often organized into further hierarchies by virtue of the relative rank of the values they express." (2012:120). It is important to stress that I do not see values as abstract from practice but values themselves are constantly produced and reproduced through socially embedded and situated actions. In this sense, cultural values would not univocally arrange other cultural elements. Instead, they would be in a dialectic relation of continuous re-creation, involving existing social representations of what is moral (relatively desirable and obligatory) and that individuals of the group conceive as (morally, pragmatically, affectively) preferable.

Robbins' formulation, I believe, is useful for conceiving the existence of different (culturally produced and represented) domains of social activity which may be hierarchically arranged and in which the expected behavior of individuals may be guided by different values. The higher and lesser representations of those domains may inform the valuing of the practices (and thus, acting individuals) displayed in them.

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The rest of this work will be structured in the next way. In chapter 2, I will reconstruct the historical trajectories in the formation of the *liberal* elite and the political practices by these actors. By this, I seek

to both present their recurrent convergences with other actors related to the right-wing, as well as marking certain continuities and novelties with their practices in the present time. In the last part of the chapter I will present the main aspects that define the current political context in Argentina, and the liberal surge in it.

The following three chapters present analogous structures between themselves: they all introduce significant social spaces for the practices and sociability of actors of the liberal movement, and gradually connect those practices and actors to the wider picture of the intertwining between politics and morality. This classification in three social spaces is not perfect, as it partially leads to a reified understanding of practices and actors that may occur in a *continuum*. However, I believe it provides a useful structure for the reader.

Chapter 3 is devoted to the networks of *academic* institutions, which are critical both for the reproduction of *liberals* as an elite and the deployment of their political practices – which the actors keenly conceive as related to the dissemination of ideas. In relation to this, I will address the role of the *ideas of liberty* as core element in group's values, from which it is possible to understand the elite group organization and its relation to diverse sets of actors. In turn, chapter 4 focuses on the *liberal* political parties, where I characterize Mejorar and compare it with other *liberal* forces. Here I chiefly analyze how *liberal politics* is permeated by the bonds of the *referentes* to the *liberal* networks and the elite group values, which entails constraints for politicians. Also, I address internal frictions between actors of the liberal movement with more 'progressive' or more 'conservative' stances on non-strictly economic issues. In chapter 5, I approach the practices of *liberal* and 'liberal' *referentes* who became gained certain relevance in the liberal movement by their actions in relation to the *cultural battle* in the media. I analyze how the rise of these figures is concomitant of a challenge of the (tacit) existing hierarchies in the liberal movement. Further, I comment on generational frictions between younger and older actors of such movement. Finally, in chapter 6, I summarize the main elements of the work and offer some reflections on how anthropology could benefit from further research in this area of vacancy.

2. Historical notes on *liberals*

In this chapter I reconstruct the main lines in the historical organization of Argentinian *liberals*. Thus, I will only attend to certain aspects of Argentinian political history in order to contextualize these trajectories.

The reference to *liberals* as related to the right, throughout the introduction, might have caught the reader's attention. While I expect that association to become clearer in the following section, I may anticipate that the right in Argentina has often been classified as integrated by two main 'families' who have their own internal differences¹²:

“On the one hand, the nationalistic-reactionary, whose central actors conceive the Argentinian identity as connected to a Hispanic-catholic legacy, the armed forces and the church as guardians of a “national being” threatened by the liberal and leftist modernity. On the other hand, the liberal-conservative right, linked to the promotion of a republican political order and a capitalist economical order based in the 1853 Constitution, whose members express wariness about democracy for its relative weaknesses in front of the strikes of leftism and populism” (Morresi et al., 2021, 135)

Another clarification is necessary. Although it is possible to draw concrete historical relations between those elites and the ones I study, the assessment of the continuities and ruptures between these groups is beyond the possibilities of this work. This difference will be left-aside while referring to the rise of institutions and individuals that hold well documented continuities with the object of my study; that is, the formation of the *current liberal* elite.

Elites in the foundation of the State

In 1853, 37 years and a civil war after the declaration of independence, Argentina's first Constitution was finally established. Largely conceived in order to attract European immigration to populate a vast territory, foster economic development and transform (and form) the nation's inhabitants and their customs, the Constitutional text was marked by a combination of liberal principles (religious and economic liberties) and conservative positions, related to a restricted access to political rights in a centralized presidential system (Botana, 2019; Zimmermann, 2011).

The establishment of the Constitution was soon to be followed by a period of territorial expansion - conquering natives' lands, modern State formation and consolidation and, some years later, intense economic and population growth as a consequence of an intense immigration process and the

¹² Besides academic works, this association is also present on mainstream public discourse (e.g. “Elecciones 2021”, 2021).

improving position of Argentinian meat and cereal exports in international markets. Such a period was characterized by the political domination of landowning elites of liberal and conservative inspiration, which by the end of the century had instigated reforms oriented towards the secularization of the State, the development of a public education system, favored the construction of exports' infrastructures and, simultaneously, kept the political system largely restricted within the margins of the local oligarchy (Botana, 2019).

Towards the second decade of the 20th century there were growing claims for social and political reform, perceived as necessary for the regeneration of the existing system. This cause, prominently set in motion by liberal reformist intellectuals, among others, was resisted by the most conservative part of those liberal elites. Be that as it may, the expansion of the right to vote was finally settled in 1912, opening the path for mass democracy in Argentina (Adamovsky, 2019; Zimmermann, 1992).

This period that ranges from 1853 (especially since 1880) to 1916 (election of first president by mass suffrage) is very dear to today's *liberals* in their historical representations, and often referred to as a proof that the country's 'golden era' took place when the *ideas of liberty* were in government. In fact, Juan Bautista Alberdi, main inspirer of the 1853 Constitution, is regularly evoked as a symbol of a *liberal* prosperous Argentina, conceived in opposition to the 'populist' and 'decadent' Argentina, which they imagine as established with the governments of Juan Perón 1946-1955¹³.

In any case, the liberal tradition became intertwined with conservatism very early in Argentinian history. The 19th century elites, often deemed 'oligarchic', that ruled the country during its construction as a modern national state articulated a hierarchical and laic conservative political stance with liberal economic policies which sought to modernize the country (Botana 2019). To conceptualize this phenomenon, some authors have developed on the category of 'liberal-conservatism'. Morresi (2008) conceives liberal-conservatism as a branch of liberalism which a) values experience over theory and is contrary to rationalism, b) is moderate and prudential about social change, c) opposes progressive redistribution of wealth and resources, but supports State actions that consolidate order, orients economy and protects rights, d) mistrusts democracy and its 'populist tendencies', e) respects the wisdom of tradition and inherited institutions. Vicente (2015) emphasizes this ideology's elitist conception of the masses, which are seen as in need of education and, until that is achieved, a threat to minorities. As a consequence, democracy is not necessarily a starting point for liberal-conservatives, since its conditions are not necessarily satisfied. It postulates a hierarchical social order compatible with a restricted conception of the republic and built on the values of liberty and order.

13 For a few examples, see Benegas Lynch (2019a) or Etchebarne (2020).

In this analytical conception, liberal-conservatism differs from conservatism in the sense that it does not oppose the market, social change or individualism, as it does not necessarily have a negative view of its potentially dissolving effects. On the other hand, liberal-conservatism differs from classical liberalism because of its support of a hierarchical social order. It shares the ideal of freedom, but believes that its limits should be more restricted.

Participation in military governments

This suspicious attitude towards democracy and the masses was a constant among the Argentinian elites in the 20th century. If the ‘oligarchic republic’ (Botana, 2019) ended with the democratization, the liberal-conservative consensus lasted until the 1930 economic crisis and military coup (Heredia, 2002; Vicente, 2015). The more conservative leaning sectors of the previously ruling elites failed to constitute a modern political party and resorted to non-electoral political intervention strategies, such as military coups, in a context in which they perceived that they could not achieve government through institutional mechanisms (Lázzari, 2020). In this fashion, liberal-conservatives, alongside nationalists, were part of almost all the governments established after military coups in the 20th century in Argentina. This was the case after the 1930, 1955, 1962 (only coup followed by a civil government), 1966 and 1976; the 1943 coup could be seen as the only exception to this rule.

After the 1930 crisis -heavily related to the 1929 global crisis-, Argentina’s economic mainlines started to turn from the exports of cattle and agricultural products towards an incipient State sponsored industrialization process aimed at substituting the nation’s dependence on imported goods. As a consequence, the 1930’ decade marks the start of a process of growing light industries, internal migration towards metropolitan centers and union growth. This trend only deepened during the first two governments of Juan Domingo Perón (1946-1952, 1952-1955). Perón managed to build a strong personal leadership (with authoritarian traces), that summoned workers masses, expanding labor rights. Simultaneously, he was heavily resisted and opposed by sectors which deemed him a ‘populist dictator’. Those governments mark the start of the main divide in Argentinian politics: that between peronists and anti-Peronists. Perón was toppled by a military coup in 1955, beginning an era of restricted democracy in which Peronist forces were banned from the political system until 1973. Nonetheless, the Peronist identity remained deeply ingrained in large sectors of society, especially among the working classes and unions. The doctrinal justification by liberal intellectuals for the proscription of the most popular party was usually based in the lack of civic education of the masses that supported it, which rendered the democratic system a threat to the republic (Nallim, 2014). In

relation to this, a critical distinction was displayed by liberal-conservative intellectuals, that between "true democracy (republican, representative and liberal) and false democracy (populist, demagogic, totalitarian)" (Morresi & Vicente, 2017, 16); an opposition with echoes in present denunciations against 'populism'¹⁴.

In this period of recurrent military coups and limited democracy, liberal-conservative intellectuals were regularly part of government, usually in charge of the Ministry of Economy and related areas. In the context of the governing coalitions, they were seldom able to overcome the more State expansion-prone conservative and nationalist sectors. Thus, the liberal tradition in Argentina's post-war era has been described as marked by resistance (Heredia 2004). This situation was only reversed in the 1970s, which became a turning point for the liberal tradition in Argentina.

First wave of liberal think tanks

Anyways, even though in the mid 1950's liberalism was "a minority's ideology associated with the opposition to popular democracy" (Haidar 2017:4) after the overthrow of Perón, the spreading of liberal ideas experimented a notorious boost: specialized institutions and publications were created, national and transnational networks of intellectuals were built, and some of the main exponents of those currents were invited to lecture in Argentina¹⁵. Fischer and Plehwe (2017) observe this as the first wave of neoliberal think tank founding, characterized by personal contacts and informal networking.

The authors note that "some of them started as business organizations and were later transformed into think tanks" (Fischer & Plehwe, 2017, 161). Argentinian chambers of business early developed institutes for economical analysis. However, prior to this period professional advisers were scarce and those who directed those centres usually were esteemed because of their socioeconomic status rather than their academic expertise. Those institutes were more effective as means for later reaching public offices than as producers of knowledge (Heredia 2004). In that context, new centres and institutes were created as part of a transformation in the corporate forms of political influence. For example, the Fundación de Investigaciones Económicas Latinoamericanas (FIEL) was created in 1964, with funds of the main Argentinian chambers of business and the Ford Foundation. FIEL sought to provide technical analyses for businessmen and specialists, as well as lobbying.

According to Heredia (2004), this process is also related to the professionalization of the economy in Argentina. In the late 1950s the career of economy was created in some public universities and soon

14 It is crucial to bear in mind that by 'populism', *liberals* almost exclusively refer to left-wing populism.

15 This was the case of Friedrich von Hayek, Ludwig von Mises, Wilhelm Röpke and Henry Hazlitt, among others, from the late 50's to the 70's.

there were also private study and research centres. The United States' academia was adopted as the role model for the development of economy as a science in Argentina by the 'modernizing' elites: conducting postgraduate studies in US universities, publishing in prestigious foreign journals and participating in international networks of knowledge production and application became the main criteria for assessing the quality of intellectual work. As the author states, this was in tight relation with United States diplomatic agenda in the context of the Cold War. Thus different agencies, corporations and organizations offered scholarships for studying in United States.

In this sense, in the 1960s some universities settled international exchange programs with the Chicago School of Economics (Haidar 2017). Also, in 1958 Alberto Benegas Lynch (Sr.) founded the Centro de Difusión de la Economía Libre (CDEL), with close relations with Leonard Read's Foundation for Economic Education (FEE)¹⁶. FEE funded and administrated scholarships for studying in United States to young people related to CDEL, with the object of preparing them for teaching in Argentina, especially, for disseminating the economic science according to the Austrian school. With the aim of spreading those ideas, and revitalizing the 'Argentinian liberal tradition', the centre published a journal, books, conducted translations, organized courses, seminars and conferences (Haidar 2017).

Similar practices were also developed by other institutions¹⁷ (Haidar 2017; Heredia 2004), but there were differences between them. While Benegas Lynch emphasized the educational aspect of his work and was suspicious about directly participating in politics, another liberal *referente* "considered that the economists should 'abandon the ivory tower' and 'descend to the political arena to unmask the politicians that improvised as pseudo-economists'" (Morresi, 2009, p. 333). In this sense, the latter created a think tank that operated as a platform for launching his political proposals and a "centre for creating refined economic projects to be ready in case his services were required" (Ib.).

In contrast, the CDEL educational objectives lead to the foundation of ESEADE in 1978, a university created by Benegas Lynch (Jr.) which gathered wide corporate support. Also in 1978, the think tank Centro de Estudios Macroeconómicos de Argentina (CEMA) was founded by some of the young economists that had studied in United States; CEMA later became a university (UCEMA) that focused on post-graduate courses on business administration and economy.¹⁸

16 As a diplomatic official in United States after the 1955 coup, Benegas Lynch (Sr.) deepened his already existing relations with Read, Hayek and Mises, as well as Ayn Rand.

17 Here I refer to the Instituto de Economía Social de Mercado, founded in 1965 by Álvaro Alsogaray. Alsogaray was Minister of Industry (1955-1956), Minister of Economy (1959-1961 and June-December 1962) and Ambassador in United States (1966-1968). He founded 3 liberal political parties, the last of them the UCEDE, which was third in the 1989 Presidential elections. He held a regular correspondence with Friedrich Von Hayek.

18 I will come back to ESEADE and UCEMA in present time on chapter 3.

Traditional and technocratic liberals

These institutions and practices fueled noticeable transformations among *liberals*, which would sediment in the late 1970s: diverse authors have observed the 1976-1983 dictatorship (PRN) as a turning point for liberals in Argentina (Beltrán, 2005; Canelo, 2008; Heredia, 2002, 2004; Morresi, 2008; Vicente, 2014, 2015). In relation to these transformations, differences between two broad groups of liberals constructed as ideal-types have been observed: ‘traditional’ liberals and ‘technocratic’ liberals (Canelo, 2008; Heredia, 2004). These groups diverged in their generations, class, forms of legitimization and training.

In this construction, the ‘traditional’ liberal intellectuals were part of a generation mostly born in the first two decades of the 20th Century. These individuals often were part of the most traditional elite families in Argentina; it has been pointed out that their relation to liberalism raised from this class extraction, which also granted them fluid relations with powerful economic, political sectors, as well as the military and traditional media. This also relates to their participation in all the *de facto* governments since 1955, “constituting the ideological and technical base” of those military dictatorships (Beltrán, 2005, 41). The political and economic positions of this group were tightly connected to that of the traditional corporate entities, of which they were part of as members of the direction of national or foreign companies. Anyways, their training in economics was usually related to their work and relations with those groups and not with graduate studies. Although interested in economy, most of them had graduated (only a few of them abroad, not in USA but in Europe) in other careers, such as law, philosophy or social sciences (Heredia, 2004; Vicente, 2015).

On the other hand, ‘technocratic’ liberals were younger, born around the 1940 decade. These often belonged to middle-class families, sometimes being sons or grandsons of immigrants and, even, being part of their family’s first generation of professionals (Beltrán, 2005). In this sense, their bonds with liberalism were mostly based in their professional formation, usually as economists in United States’ universities such as Harvard or Chicago. Thus, these individuals legitimized themselves through their ‘expert’ technical knowledge, conceived as scientific and neutral. Also, it has been noted these individuals’ bonds with the international financial community, originated in their shared studies and teaching at US universities (Heredia, 2004). Even though many of them were officials of the 1976-1983 dictatorship -self-defined as ‘National Reorganization Process’ (PRN)- in economic areas, they did not have as much visibility as the ‘traditional’ liberals.

During the PRN *liberal* intellectuals played a central role articulating its diverse wings in a coherent system of liberal-conservative ideas under the guidance of the military (Heredia, 2002; Morresi, 2007;

2008; Vicente, 2015). They embraced a “western and Christian” identity, which had to be defended against Peronism and communism, in what they understood as “a battle of the third world war” (Morresi, 2008: 51). At that time, liberal-conservative intellectuals conceived Argentina as a decadent chaotic country which the new military government was called to order and refound. In the context of the PRN, the ‘technocratic’ and ‘traditional’ groups competed for resources and key positions in State administration, and it has been held that their different theoretical formation was a significant divide among liberals (Beltrán, 2005; Canelo, 2008; Heredia, 2004).¹⁹

Although these actors intended to distance themselves of the PRN after its ending, Morresi holds that both groups had enthusiastically supported it and agreed on the mainlines “1) the general analysis (which affirms that the State and the unions are the two main causes of the economic problems), 2) a series of objectives and concrete proposals (privatizations, commercial deregulation, cracking the unions’ power), 3) referenced authors (Hayek, Mises, Erhard...), 4) an ethical-political view (property right as priority, distrust towards the capacity of the Argentinian democratic systems prior to 1976)” (Morresi, 2009: 342). In fact, Morresi underlines the relevance of ethical-political matters, which would be the ultimate focus of liberalism.

Towards 1983, the year in which the PRN ended, *liberals* intended to reconfigure some practices widely perceived as ‘unacceptable dictatorial policies’ in terms of a democratic discourse, such as the liberalization of markets, the management-oriented government, rising inequality and attacks on populism (Morresi, 2008). In this context, liberals sought to emphasize their technical presentation, relegating their ties to catholic conservative and nationalist traditions. "However, those traces that distinguish this new right (or neoliberal right) should not conceal that its origins are in the old right, with which it shared ideas, individuals, plans and governments more than once" (Morresi, 2008, 9).

Reaching the end of history

Simultaneously, the 1980s saw the second wave of neoliberal think tank founding (Fischer & Plehwe, 2017). This process was marked by the impulse of the Atlas Economic Research Foundation (from now on, Atlas Network). Unlike institutions created during the previous wave, these organizations were more clearly characterized by their internal coherence and ideological unity.

19 Morresi (2009) agrees on the social-cultural differences between these groups, and their relatively different interests as such, but contests the alleged contrast between their conceptual orientations. Many of the ‘traditional intellectuals’ would have been the first to follow a modernizing and ‘scientific’ neoliberal theoretical change. Thus, the ‘traditional elites’ were, at least, as much devotees of neoliberal authors (mainly of the Austrian school) than of the ‘Argentinian liberal tradition’. If anything, he observes that the ‘traditional neoliberal elite’ questioned some policies which were related to the monetarism of the Chicago school of economics, but that is only one of the ‘neoliberal’ currents.

Moreover, they often highlighted their long-term commitment to transformation through ideas, for which they took distance from the short-term interest of reaching public offices or the effects of their policies in corporations, which could be negatively affected by their advocated policies (see Bongiovanni, 2011)²⁰. This would also be related to their alleged neutral 'objective' stance. Thus, this second wave would be related to an expanded autonomy of the activities of the think tanks, and more intense relations with the international academic institutions.

Again, the confluence of national and international processes provided a significant impulse for the *liberals* here. During the 1980s, amid a still deteriorating economic situation (crowned by the 1989-1990 hyper-inflationary crisis), neoliberal discourse gradually became hegemonic. Some significant factors could be observed in this sense: the pressure exercised by international credit institutions which used the debts incurred by the PRN to advance the neoliberal agenda, the support to these ideas provided by the traditional media, the constant participation of neoliberal think tank representatives in the public debate and the growth of the UCEDE party (Heredia, 2002; Morresi, 2008).

In this context, the UCEDE obtained the 3rd position in the 1989 Presidential elections, won by the peronist Menem's Partido Justicialista. After the elections, the party sealed an agreement with Menem and *liberals*, unprecedentedly, supported a peronist government. The idea that neoliberal policies were 'necessary' for 'modernizing' the country and that they represented the 'future' appeared as a truism in the 1990s, when *liberal* experts and politicians became a crucial part of the governing administration and its profound economical and institutional reforms. These ideas were represented as opposed to the 'socialist practices that failed everywhere', the 'old populism' and its defense of the State's role (Morresi, 2008).

The reforms conducted by Harvard economist Domingo Cavallo as Minister of Economy (1991-1996) were characterized by the privatization of state-owned companies, the deregulation of markets and the suppression of protectionist measures, as well as by the establishment of a monetary rule that steeply cut the inflation rates (that had reached 2000% in 1990). These reforms, however, proved to be unsustainable over time, leading to a stark inequality marked by mass unemployment, foreclosing companies, growing poverty and untamed financial debt. In December 2001, amid an all out political, social and economic crisis, President De La Rúa (UCR) resigned.

Liberal politics in the new millennium

20 The difference may be perceived in the origins of their funds. While FIEL was also sponsored by companies of the industrial sector, which are often seen by *liberals* as more dependent on State's protection, CEMA was mostly supported by companies of the financial and agribusiness sectors (Heredia, 2004).

Much could be said on the process followed by *liberal* actors in relation to politics since 2001. For the sake of brevity, I will synthesize what I deem most relevant for my work. As observed, the two main currents in the Argentinian right had substantial differences among themselves throughout the 20th century, but they regularly coincided in certain moments, usually coups. After the consolidation of democracy in 1983, the divergence of those mainlines became starker. However, since 2001, and especially after 2008, the different forms of the right started to converge in political actions as demonstrations (Morresi, Saferstein, Vicente 2021).

These protests gathered diverse claims, but invoked recognizable elements of the liberal-conservative tradition related to republican elements, such as concerns towards the independence of the three branches of power, corruption and the claim that the government was a ‘populist tyranny’, as well as the anti-leftism that often characterized the nationalistic-reactionary tradition (Gómez, 2014). In relation to this, the ‘threat of becoming Venezuela’ operated as a bridge between both discursive frames (Morresi et al., 2021; Sagarzazu & Mouron, 2020).

Lastly, a comment shall be made regarding the political strategies followed by *liberals* during these years. In the context of the 2001-2002 crisis, RECREAR, a party led by a *liberal* and also integrated by conservative leaning individuals, obtained the third place in 2003 elections. While, as in 1989, the party’s results were significant in the aftermath of the crisis, a few years later it dissolved into the rising centre-right PRO, lead by Mauricio Macri. The PRO maintained a minor *liberal* current within its structure. Also, marginal *liberal* parties continued to exist or were even created without significant influence on the overall political debate. Simultaneously, *liberal* think tanks continued working with the objective of influencing public opinion, and many of them were created throughout the country in the first two decades of the 21st century.²¹

In this sense, *liberals* developed different types of political strategies: a) constructing a party that comprises actors oriented towards the right but lead by a *liberal*, b) integrating wider parties or coalitions as a minor internal current, c) constructing a *liberal* party, d) non-electoral political strategies by seeking to influence actors through the action of think tanks. Regarding these, it is worth noting that the first of these was relatively successful for *liberals* in times of steep economic crisis (1989 and 2001), but those forces did not maintain that adhesion over time. On the other hand, the second option allowed *liberals* a role that, at least during fieldwork, in such context of expanded ambitions, was

21 In this regard, in 2006 the director of the Atlas Network was cautiously optimistic of the *liberal* advances in Latin America, even though progressive governments were prevailing. He underscored that while in 1975, when their breakthrough began, there were 7 ‘free-market think tanks’ and 10 universities with ‘free-market champions’, in 2005 those numbers were up to 35 and 40 respectively (Chafuén, 2006). This is telling of how this group conceives its political practices, as I will show in the next chapter.

regularly deemed insufficient -but still valued, as was clear through their important relations with the political figures of the encompassing parties. I have not observed any case in which the construction of a purely *liberal* party was relevant in Argentina. In any case, the latter of the mentioned options is/was the one most intensely embraced by *liberals*.

General political context during fieldwork

‘The rift’ [*la grieta*]: such metaphor has been used to describe Argentinian politics since 2008. The rift refers to a configuration of the political arena marked by an intense (and ever increasing) polarization ultimately focused on Cristina Fernández de Kirchner - former President (2007-2015) and current Vicepresident (2019-present) (Goldentul & Saferstein, 2020). On the one end of the pole, the strongest critics of her represent the 'rift' as an opposition between a ‘populist’, corrupt and totalitarian force that endangers Argentina’s republican institutions and economy. On the other side, the devoted supporters of her governments conceive it as a struggle between those demanding social justice against the 'conservative' and 'neoliberal' right, and its strong media outlets.

This was the scenario in 2015 when Cambiemos, a coalition formed by the three main opposition parties (PRO, UCR and Coalición Cívica), won the presidential elections in a close race. This centre-right (Vommaro and Morresi 2015) front unified most of the opposition, with special success among urban middle classes. Going beyond a mere change of administration, "Cambiemos hoisted the banner of an indispensable 'cultural change' (...) to end the populist Argentina" (Canelo, 2019, 12); it promised a transformation which would bring economic growth and stability to a stagnating country with high deficit and inflation, as well as the strengthening of republican institutions. Many groups and individuals which integrate what I call ‘the liberal movement’ backed Cambiemos in 2015.

In 2019 Cambiemos lost the election against a coalition which was comprised of the sectors of Peronism represented by Cristina Fernández de Kirchner, as well as rather moderate sectors of Peronism and non-Peronist progressives. The outgoing administration left office with an inflation rate which doubled the inherited, soaring debt with private creditors and the IMF, collapsing salaries and still deteriorating economic activity. Now again in the opposition, Cambiemos in general, and PRO, its leading party, in particular, are going through a dispute for its leadership that may be characterized in terms of two wings. On the one side, Patricia Bullrich, now President of the PRO, represents a confrontational hard-line which embraces polarization against a government that deems nonsensical and totalitarian. These actors seek to create and strengthen bridges to actors related to more radical positions, including *liberals* and conservatives. Differently, other PRO/Cambiemos leaders hold a more

moderate position, clearly opposed to the national government but less emphatic to claims around its alleged threat to the republic.

During the whole period of the Cambiemos government, and with perceptible intensity since the widely acknowledged economic failure of that administration, many *liberal referentes* gained public visibility with their criticism towards an administration which they observed as not conducting the structural reforms (labor laws reform, cutting taxes, reducing public expenditure) which they deemed necessary in order to overcome the country's 'decadence'. The most popular of these rising *referentes* is Javier Milei. This *anacap* (anarcho-capitalist) managed to become a sort of rock-star among a segment of the youth; his constant interventions on mainstream TV²², characterized by an aggressive style against 'leftists', 'Keynesians' and 'politicians' in general, became viral on an almost daily basis, and merchandise (shirts, cups) with his silhouette started to be sold. Milei's TV appearances are perceived by other *liberals* as the cause of their own enlarged air-time. Although *liberals* have continually participated in mainstream media, the vast enthusiasm generated by their ideas in general, and Milei's in particular, was a novelty to them, at least since the 1980s (Etchebarne, 2019). As a result, other *liberals* started communicating their ideas in a confrontational style, combining their appearances on mainstream media with an intense use of social media. This fueled the popularization of some *liberal referentes*, most of them economists.

Milei's role in the *liberal* surge was regularly commented upon during fieldwork, both by *liberal referentes* and supporters. At the founding event of a party in January 2020, its main *referente* (also director of a think tank) mentioned that while traveling throughout Argentina to create a national *liberal* party he regularly asked his interlocutors in the auditoriums to raise their hands if they had learned about liberalism because of Milei: an average of 85% of the audiences would raise their hands after this question. Also, at an Instagram Live with Milei, the director of a *liberal* think tank noted that many teenagers recently reached to the organization willing to become '*liberals* as Milei'. This rise among young people is maybe starkest in social media, in which 'liberals' often combine simultaneous identifications with liberalism, libertarianism and the 'right' (Stefanoni, 2021).

Liberal political forces were set to run in the 2019 elections. However, after a promising first round for the coalition integrated by Cristina Fernández, there were calls by *liberals* to drop other candidacies to strengthen Cambiemos. Accordingly, Mejorar's released a statement that they would be stepping down from the municipal elections:

22 Milei was the most interviewed economist between 28/12/2017 and 7/9/2018, with almost 25% more air-time than the runner-up, also a *liberal* economist ("¿Quiénes son...", 2018). Equivalent data for other periods could not be found.

In front of the inescapable reality that in the elections we choose between a demagogic fascism, populist and authoritarian, or a civilized and democratic republicanism, despite the ideological distances that separate us from the current national government, we have chosen to stand on the correct side of history.

Even though we do not participate in this government, and neither do we intend to, it is time to choose between the Republic and the Abyss.

Alberto Benegas Lynch (Jr.), perhaps the most respected liberal in Argentina, published an open letter to Espert, the liberal presidential candidate, asking him to step down from his candidacy. In it, he opined that they had to choose between "uselessness and the abyss"; while the former gave them time to act, the latter would seek to install a "totalitarian model".

Advocating a different stance, José Luis Espert sought to challenge the idea that the debate was characterized by the polarization between Cambiemos and Frente de Todos. He insisted that the Cambiemos government was, in practice, a socialist government, which was equivalent to kirchnerism but 'with good manners'. Thus, a liberal alternative to these political projects would be indispensable.

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This overview presents elements that characterize the liberal movement in the current context. It stresses the *liberal* perception of a window of opportunity for their successful participation in politics. This has been influenced by a) the decade-long national context of polarization which, despite *liberals'* closeness to winning in one pole, may have eroded the main coalitions, b) the rise of certain *referentes* in the media, and c) the increasing visibility of a segment of the youth identified with liberalism, which d) positions itself as close to the 'right-wing'. Also, it points to some internal frictions on political strategy that are emerging these days.

To achieve the political transformations that they aspire towards, *liberals* imagine two paths: the *cultural battle* and *politics*. Both are understood to be complementary and necessary to 'take Argentina out of its decadence', but with different objectives, meanings, and encompassing different practices. While *politics* is mainly understood by *liberals* in institutional terms, more specifically, in terms of government and access to it, the *cultural battle* refers to the dispute around ideas and values that predominate within a society. They are connected: the *cultural battle* would not be sufficient for overcoming Argentina's decadence; a government delivering the structural reforms would still be necessary. Simultaneously, if not for the *cultural battle*, those structural reforms would be impossible, as they would not find enough support for fighting the 'populist' *statu quo*.

While analytically I observe both of them as part of the political practices developed by *liberals*, the actors' classification will be useful for later the practices and relations produced by the actors. For *liberals* the main difference between practices understood as part of *politics* and those related to the *cultural battle* lays in the fact that the former implies negotiation and pragmatism, while in the latter their ideas are spread purely, without those constraints.

3. Academia

We need intellectual leaders who are willing to work for an ideal, however small may be the prospects of its early realization. They must be men who are willing to stick to principles and to fight for their full realization, however remote. The practical compromises they must leave to politicians.

Friedrich Von Hayek – The intellectuals and socialism

In the previous chapter I highlighted the role of intellectuals, think tanks and other academic institutions in the historical production of the *liberal* elite in Argentina. In fact, this characteristic may be a main feature not only of the Argentinian section of this group but globally. As Plehwe and Walpen state, “we attribute the continuing strength of neoliberal paradigms in particular (though by no means exclusively (...)) to well-developed and deeply entrenched networks of neoliberal knowledge production and diffusion, intellectuals and think tanks” (Plehwe & Walpen, 2006, 28). In my observations, the references to ‘knowledge’, its production and diffusion, was most usually expressed in terms of ideas - ‘the *ideas* of liberty’ [*las ideas de la libertad*] - when it came to *liberal* ideas.

Even though ‘ideas’ have been, through centuries, a common reference in countless works by authors related to the liberal tradition, the role of this category appears to be specially influenced by the reflections and actions of Friedrich von Hayek – the exponent of the Austrian School of Economics and most cherished author by *liberals* in the conducted observations. Hayek considered ‘ideas’ to be the ultimate reason explaining individual actions and, thus, the defining element within the political struggles. In a much cited text, he wrote: "What to the contemporary observer appears as the battle of conflicting interests has indeed often been decided long before in a clash of ideas confined to narrow circles" (Hayek, 1949, 372). In this sense, he conceived transformations in terms of a pyramid, where ideas would trickle down from the top (where they are still abstract and general), reaching larger and more concrete application-related audiences at every step of the way (Hayek, 2011). This would not be a linear process, as ideas become transformed while they pass through different levels. However, those that ‘produce ideas’ at the top would hold a role of extreme relevance here.

As a consequence, he underscored the role of 'secondhand dealers of ideas' for influencing the political choices of a society. This 'class' includes the individuals that may not produce the abstract ideas themselves, but who spread them: journalists, teachers, ministers, lecturers, publicists, radio commentators, writers of fiction, cartoonists, artists and, also, "professional men and technicians, such as scientists and doctors, who through their habitual intercourse with the printed word become carriers of new ideas outside their own fields and who, because of their expert knowledge of their own subjects,

are listened with respect on most others. There is little that the ordinary man of today learns about events or ideas except through the medium of this class" (1949:372).

Transnational networks

These reflections are widely known and embraced by *liberals*, something that became very evident during fieldwork. I do not refer to Hayek here because I want to discuss his ideas, but because his perspective strongly influenced the constitution of transnational *liberal* networks via the Mont Pelerin Society, which Hayek founded and presided over (Plehwe, 2009; Plehwe et al., 2006)²³. This is most clearly expressed through an anecdote on the origins of the Atlas Network which I heard repeated plenty of times during fieldwork²⁴:

It is said that Anthony Fisher, a British businessman that had served in WW2, became deeply inspired after reading Hayek's *Road to serfdom*. As a consequence, he approached Hayek (who was teaching at the London School of Economics) and expressed to him his intention of creating a political party that followed his ideas. Hayek dissuaded him, insisting that the best way for delivering the desired transformations was not by engaging directly in the domain of politics, but by spreading those ideas in the manner commented on in the previous paragraphs. Following Hayek's advice, Fisher created the first *liberal* think tank in Great Britain, the Institute of Economic Affairs (IEA). As the IEA revealed itself as a tremendous success, having a decisive influence in Margaret Thatcher and her government, it became a priority to replicate its model. Thus, Fisher devoted his life to developing connections between businessmen and the 'academic world'; among countless organizations, he founded the Atlas Economic and Research Foundation in 1981.²⁵

The Atlas Network, as it is now known, provides seed money, contacts and 'know-how' to intellectual 'entrepreneurs', contributing to the foundation of institutions (Fischer & Plehwe, 2017; Mato, 2007). Many institutions in Argentina benefited from this support during their founding period and continue to be part of the Atlas Network (Marty, 2015). Currently, the Atlas Network connects 474 organizations worldwide, 102 of which are established in Latin America and the Caribbean; 14 of which are in Argentina²⁶. Simultaneously, some of those think tanks (e.g. Fundación Libertad) replicate

23 The Mont Pelerin Society (MPS) was founded in 1947 with the aim of renovating the liberal tradition. It gathers 'neoliberal' (Plehwe, 2009) intellectuals from various disciplines, journalists, politicians and corporate leaders (De Büren, 2019).

24 As mentioned previously, the Atlas Network is critically related to the second wave of neoliberal think tanks that boomed in the 1980s (Plehwe & Fischer, 2019).

25 This story has been observed many times during fieldwork without significant variations. A version of it can also be found in Marty (2015).

26 See table 1 in Appendix.

those practices on a national scale, promoting the creation of think tanks in other cities, networking with existing organizations and providing institutional know how and contacts (Bongiovanni, 2011).

The role of these networks may be perceived through the following quote by the founder of Fundación Libertad Gerardo Bongiovanni:

On several occasions I have been asked about what contributed to turning Fundación Libertad into a large and consolidated organization and when it happened. The answer is not an easy one; it has been a long and continuous process, in which numerous actions, people and circumstances were interacting. However, I believe that the years 1992–93 were a turning point in the course of our organization; it was the time when we began to ‘go international.’ As was the case on multiple occasions, the Atlas Economic Research Foundation played a key role in this achievement. After inviting me to a workshop in Punta del Este, Uruguay, at the end of 1991, Alex Chafuen²⁷ gave us his support and, most importantly, provided us with access to his impressive network of contacts. Without a doubt, I can say that, of all the people I have met in the ‘free market movement’ (and to tell you the truth, I know a lot of people), I have come into contact with 80 percent of them thanks to Atlas.

(...) In the years to follow, Fundación Libertad invited seven economy Nobel Prize winners (including Gary Becker and James Buchanan), numerous intellectuals (including Paul Johnson, Mario Vargas Llosa and Jean Francoise Revel) as well as more than 200 lecturers from more than 50 countries in the world to Argentina. We also became members of different international networks and organizations, such as the Economic Freedom Network and Friedrich Naumann Foundation network, thus learning from our colleagues in a truly enriching process. (2011, p. 47)

Besides Atlas, there are many other relevant actors in the *liberal* transnational networks. For example, the Friedrich Naumann Foundation, linked to the German liberal party (FDP), settled in Argentina in 1983. This institution also provides financial support, contacts and experience for the development of local organizations (namely think tanks), as well as training and scholarships. It also works through the construction of networks, as is the case of Red por la Libertad (which comprises the main *liberal* think tanks from Argentina) or the Red Liberal de América Latina (RELIAL, which gathers *liberal* think tanks and parties from Latin America). So, in sum, *liberal* actors are organized in overlapping networks, and operate on multiple (local, national, regional and global) scales (Plehwe & Fischer, 2019)²⁸. Besides networks, diverse organizations from Argentina hold mutual relations with institutions from abroad.²⁹

Not only do these networks overlap with each other, but so does their personnel: the most prominent of their members are often part of various organizations through their directories, consultative or academic councils. Plehwe and Fischer (2019, 185) have referred to the individuals that link think

27 From 1991 to 2017 the Atlas Network was presided by the Argentinian-US citizen Alejandro Chafuén.

28 It must be noted that networks as a formalized object may be constructed for instrumental purposes, but are not a condition for a 'networked' activity.

29 There is a division of labor among think tanks. As noted by Plehwe and Fischer (2019, 184), "There are think tanks that produce and popularize 'pure doctrine' and keep some distance from concrete politics.(...) Others are public policy oriented "do tanks", which engage in consultancy and still others go beyond intellectual activities".

tanks across borders as forming the "nucleus of transnational neoliberal elite". These authors studied the interconnections through scales between different 'neoliberal' networks (including Atlas, FIL, HACER and RELIAL). They found that these networks comprised 105 think tanks and 1352 individuals (occupying 2560 positions). Only 37 of these held positions in at least 2 think tanks of different countries. Interestingly, 51% of these were members of the Mont Pelerin Society (MPS); moreover, "MPS members clearly outnumber others when it comes to occupying positions in three or more think tanks" (Plehwe & Fischer, 2019, 188).

Among those 37 individuals were the already mentioned Gerardo Bongiovanni, Alejandro Chafuén and Alberto Benegas Lynch (Jr.), apart from a few other prestigious Argentinian *liberals*. In this sense, it could easily be stated that membership at certain central institutions in these networks (usually related to larger scales of them) is correlative of a higher position within the movement's hierarchy being held by these individuals.

The mentioned individuals have been important actors in *liberal* networks for decades; however, their practices display differences that may be interesting for observing distinctly valued types of work in relation to the production and dissemination of the *ideas*. On the one hand, Gerardo Bongiovanni has long stood out in the development of *liberal* think tanks and networks, but not as much when it comes to delivering lectures and theoretical writings. During fieldwork, except for an interview and very infrequent interactions on social media, I mainly observed him in his role as organizer of activities. On the other hand, while Alberto Benegas Lynch (Jr.) has founded and directed the *liberal* university ESEADE and is part of the academic councils of various think tanks, he is also most renowned as a prolific author and lecturer, and regularly writes articles in the media (sometimes also in neighboring countries). I should add that other *liberals* usually address him with distinctive respect, for example calling him 'professor'. Some researchers were also particularly respected. All these forms of valuing an individual's action hold paths for career progression within the *liberal* networks.

Some additional comments will be useful here to outline the main aspects of the *liberal academic*. Therefore, I will present a few comments on *liberal* think tanks and universities, by elaborating on two institutions: Fundación Libertad and UCEMA.

Think tanks

During fieldwork, Fundación Libertad developed diverse sorts of activities, projecting the work of the organization locally, nationally, regionally and globally. Some of these were: conferences on political and economic issues, congresses, book presentations, reports and participation on mainstream

media, among others. In general, events with a regional or larger scope featured political leaders or *liberal* scholars, more rarely individuals related to the business sector. At events with a national scope, however, often the featured individuals were related to different branches of the private sector, as well as politicians, political and economic pundits and academics.

Many of the transnational events were carried out jointly with Fundación Intenacional para la Libertad, a close partner of the organization. These activities usually implied regional (Ibero-American) scale-making practices (Tsing 2005). For example, a major venue was the 13th Atlantic Forum, which gathered the main political figures of Latin America and Spain, including current and former Presidents, opposition leaders and the General Secretary of the Organization of American States (OAS). This annual event was complemented by shorter ones throughout the year, which included some of the same participants, as well as other main political figures of Latin America -all of whom were related to political movements associated to centre-right or right positions.³⁰

The continuous relations with leading political actors of the region are representative of the prominent role of the Fundación Libertad. Significantly, the *liberal* networks not only connect *liberal* actors among themselves, but also strategically link these with others that may be conceived as actual or potential allies. In this sense, at events with a regional scope, most of the featured politicians were not closely connected to any *liberal* institution and neither were they referred to as such; however, they were often presented as ‘friends of liberty’.

This type of relations is crucial for understanding the political strategies displayed by *liberals*. During an interview with another Argentinian think tank that I observed, Gerardo Bongiovanni pondered the historical political processes that *liberals* look up to. He highlighted three of them: the governments of Ronald Reagan in United States (1981-1989), Margaret Thatcher in United Kingdom (1979-1990), and José María Aznar in Spain (1996-2004).

“What do I mean by this? That the *liberal* changes that we admire (...) happened when *liberals* managed to lead centre-right coalitions, that is when the miracles happened (...) there are no *liberal* parties that govern, that win elections, there are not (...). To achieve that [leading centre-right coalitions], the think tanks must generate a cultural climate favorable to *liberal* ideas (...). The problem is not that PRO is not *liberal*, of course the PRO is not *liberal*, but the cause of that is that liberalism, as a political option, is a completely marginal force”.

In a similar vein, the intention to influence wider centre-right coalitions was part of many activities I saw on a national scale. At observed meetings on domestic political affairs, meetings by Fundación

30 Some of the participants of these activities were Mauricio Macri (Argentina), Jorge Quiroga (Bolivia), Sebastián Piñera (Chile), Iván Duque and Álvaro Uribe (Colombia), Luis Almagro (OAS), Pablo Casado and Isabel Díaz Ayuso (Spain), Luis Lacalle Pou and Luis Alberto Lacalle (Uruguay), María Corina Machado (Venezuela), and Ministers of Bolsonaro’s Brazil Sergio Moro (justice) and Paulo Guedes (economy).

Libertad featured both *liberal* politicians and prominent members of Cambiemos, such as the current President of the PRO, Patricia Bullrich³¹. Also, regarding *liberals* acting in *politics*, Fundación Libertad (like all of Argentina's *liberal* think tanks), was more prone to holding events with *liberal* politicians that presented themselves as open to coalitioning with Cambiemos in the future. Events with *liberals* that criticized Cambiemos as a 'socialist' government also took place, but they were much less frequent.³²

While the institution hosted a regular flow of public events each week that focused on either political, economic issues, or the '*ideas of liberty*', there were also larger events that stood out in relevance. This was the case of the 16th Congress on Provincial Economy, the main annual venue organized by Fundación Libertad, which brought together politicians, businessmen, economic consultants and political analysts. Similarly, during 2020 the organization held the 10th edition of an annual event on the perspectives of the agribusiness sector, the 13th forum on economy and business (with corporate leaders), among other venues.

Many observed think tanks hold annual venues similar to those mentioned above, although with slight differences related to the particularities of the organizing think tank -e.g. when it comes to main interests, region. Thus, other think tanks with less of an international profile had a more local focus, featuring actors whose relevance was more clearly anchored in the provincial and municipal context of the organizing institution. However, at least from what I could gather via online observations, the underlying logic of these events seemed very similar³³.

According to my interview with Yamil Santoro, President of Mejorar, these venues also operate as relevant networking sites for the diverse participants. Moreover, the participants and topics may be strategically chosen by the organization according to certain objectives. For example, Santoro observed that at the end of 2019 many *liberal* political *referentes* 'casually' became speakers at an annual venue of a think tank (co-organized with the Naumann Foundation)³⁴. He implied that this was done with the intention of bridging gaps between the various *liberal* political projects that had been recently created. Also, Santoro criticized the organizer of another venue, as he considered that this organizer had overrated the position of a certain *referente* by selecting him as main speaker over others in a similar or

31 Before it merged with the PRO in 2018, Patricia Bullrich presided Unión por la Libertad. This party had a *liberal* minor internal current and it was an official partner of the Friedrich Naumann Foundation as well as member of the Liberal International. Although she featured frequently at *liberal* events, Bullrich was never deemed a *liberal* during fieldwork.

32 Other regularly held events during 2020 were focused on the analysis of the economic perspectives regarding diverse sectors (agribusiness, small companies, health companies, tourism).

33 It should be noted that not all think tanks made these events accessible to the general public, but sometimes they were restricted to members of the related institution.

34 Interview with Yamil Santoro.

more consolidated position. This was understood as fueling the man's political ambitions, complicating the ongoing negotiations among *liberals in politics*.

The relations of the Fundación Libertad with business sectors were not limited to these events. The institution is supported by over 200 companies, many of them from Rosario - the city in which it was founded³⁵. At a Live Streaming with Santoro, Alejandro Bongiovanni, director of public policies of Fundación Libertad stated:

“For good or bad, liberalism in Argentina has a too marked economic bias. Because that is how it was formed; because the great *referentes* of liberalism, not now that there is Javier [Milei], but also before, (...) they were economists or guys with a very economic mind (...). Because when you need to bond with sectors of the corporate establishment trying to raise agendas that interest the private sector it is obviously much more attractive to talk to them about public expenditure, lowering taxes, that stuff”.

Also, the institution has a School of Business which in 2020 expanded to other Latin American countries, with offices in Colombia, Paraguay and Uruguay.

Moreover, in relation to education, Fundación Libertad has a Youth Group composed by university students and young graduates with the aim of spreading ‘the ideas of liberty among the Latin American youth and contributing to the formation of the future leaders and intellectuals of the region’³⁶. During fieldwork, the general coordinator of this group, Ignacio Bongiovanni, featured at various activities, usually organized by other *liberal* youth groups.

While many of these institutional features, though to lesser scales, were recurrent among the different observed think tanks³⁷, certain activities were particular of each organizations' focus. In this sense, other institutions developed relevant practices regarding the *cultural battle* on social media. For example, Fundación Club de la Libertad sustained daily Instagram Lives with *liberals* during a substantial part of 2020, which were later uploaded on their Youtube channel. Also, Fundación Libertad y Progreso produced short videos for Youtube (some of them co-produced with the Naumann Foundation), as well as series of online lectures on *liberal* readings and Argentinian history. In fact, the work of this organization on Youtube was underscored by the 2021 *Ranking of Free-Market Think tanks measured by Social Media Impact* published in Forbes (Chafuén, 2021). In regards to this, it is interesting to note the *liberals'* interest on impact through social media and, especially, their recurrent

35 Interestingly, after participating in a few events, I received an institutional email by Fundación Libertad inviting me to a webinar on how to invest in Uruguay, where taxation would be lower.

36 <https://grupojuvenfl.wordpress.com/acerca-de/>

37 Such as the organization of annual venues gathering diverse sectors, research centres devoted to the production of data and reports, frequent meetings with local business sectors, participation on mainstream media by its directors and main analysts (usually economists), training of young individuals in the *ideas* via youth groups. Further, the fact that women were usually a small minority of the think tanks' staff was also a regularity.

references to rankings and indexes both for the assessment of the activities of think tanks and general issues, usually economy-related.³⁸

One last relevant aspect concerns the regular participation in the media of *liberal academics*, usually as economic pundits. This is conceived as a relevant practice in the spreading of *ideas* (and, thus, the *cultural battle*). An interesting practice observable in these appearances relates to the frequent cross-referencing among *liberals*. Pundits do not only refer to the data produced by the think tanks they participate in, but also to other *liberal* institutions from Argentina or abroad. The cross-referencing seems to simultaneously aim to legitimize the actors as intervening from a position of knowledge, as well as projecting the perception of a consensus around certain topics.

Universities

In chapter 2 I noted the role of ESEADE and UCEMA as institutions related to the transformation of the *liberal* elite around the 1980s. These private universities are still relevant actors when it comes to the reproduction of *liberals*³⁹. Some glimpses in relation to it may be productive.

During fieldwork I participated in some seminars at UCEMA⁴⁰, all of them held online (during the lockdown) except for one. These talks were related to two courses. On the one hand, some of them were part of a series organized by the Friedrich Naumann Foundation at UCEMA. All these events addressed international topics. I observed three of them, which featured 1) an FDP representative at the Bundestag, 2) a Brazilian *liberal*, former president of RELIAL and member of the MPS, and 3) the president of the Liberal International. The other seminars that I participated in were part of a series named ‘History and Liberty’, organized by a *liberal* who lectures both at UCEMA and ESEADE. While this series also involved lectures on international events and figures, all three seminars I observed were on Argentinian history: 1) on the discussions between two ‘national heroes’, related to the liberal tradition, around the consolidation of the Argentinian modern State towards mid 19th century, 2) on the liberal-conservative presidencies in the late 19th century, and 3) on the political violence by guerrilla groups in the 1970s. The latter, which is the one I attended physically, proved to be rich when

38 More so, Fundación Libertad, alongside other *liberal* think tanks from Argentina, regularly features at the ‘Global Go To Think Tank Index Report’ by the University of Pennsylvania. Some think tanks may publicize these results as indicative of their impact.

39 See table 2, on *liberal referentes*, in Appendix.

40 The director of UCEMA, Edgardo Zablotzky holds a PhD. in Economics (University of Chicago). He is also part of the academic or consultive council of three Argentinian *liberal* think tanks, and has recently been incorporated as a member of the Mont Pelerin Society.

it comes to perceiving UCEMA's functioning. It also was instructive in regards to the kinds of relations between *liberals* and individuals more related to the conservative tradition⁴¹.

December 11th, 2019. Upon entrance to the building, located in downtown Buenos Aires, the first thing that catches my attention is the line of turnstiles that separate me from the reception desk. The individual at the reception, a man in a private security uniform, indicates me the way to the classroom in which the seminar will take place. I find the classroom in a larger hall with boards on the walls, which display institutional posters. One poster announces benefits and career growth opportunities for the students of UCEMA: meetings with representatives of 'the best companies of Argentina' and headhunters, chances for networking, language exchanges. Another poster emphasizes the opportunities for conducting 'international experiences', as well as the 'excellence' of UCEMA's education towards the development of 'leaders'. On the opposite wall, some posters present the programs offered by the institution. The areas of expertise do not differ much between graduate and posgraduate: marketing, digital business, economy, law, political science, international relations, accountancy.

I take a seat while the room fills gradually and we wait for the lecturer. The seminar will consist in the presentation of a book by Victoria Villarruel, president of a civil association related to the victims of terrorism -as it names those killed or hurt in actions by the left-wing guerrilla groups that operated in Argentina in the 1970s. This organization works for recognition and reparation, mirroring the demands of the human rights organizations regarding the crimes against humanity conducted by the military between 1976-1983. Villarruel is not part of liberal institutions and her discourse is more relatable to the conservative right; however, her participation in this series of seminars does not surprise me: she had been part of the electoral coalition led by Mejorar a few months earlier.

In the end, around 35 people show up. Only 5 of them seem to be under the age of 40. Some of the members of the audience display recognizable political symbols: one has a cap with an Argentinian flag; another one has a cap with a cross of Burgundy⁴²; a young girl has a light-blue handkerchief around her wrist, which identifies her as part of the pro-life campaign. I recognize a man in his 40s (or rather his bag, with a sticker of the 2019 Cambiemos campaign) from an event organized by a liberal think tank some days earlier. Next to me sits a national representative in Congress, a fact that I only learn after he is being applauded for having presented a law proposal to recognize victims of a guerrilla attack to a military base in 1975.

The book presented today, originally published in 2009, is an illustrated piece that portrays personal stories of 'victims of terrorism'. Villarruel mentions that her intention is to reveal the 'historical truth' which had been distorted, and to get truth, justice, and compensation. The idea to produce such material came to her after knowing about a similar book regarding the Spanish Civil War -at this point, I remember pictures from her social media with members of the Spanish VOX, during the 2019 campaign in Madrid. Although the book is not theoretically deep, Villarruel stresses, it has ideas that are easy to grasp and that represent a part of history that would otherwise remain blurred. At the end of her exposition, she invites the attendants to become 'apostles of the truth'.

41 See chapter 4 section 'Liberprogres and liberfachos'.

42 I later saw this pro-Hispanic symbol at events related to Catholic nationalist actors.

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All in all, *liberal* think tanks and universities are essential institutions regarding the practices of *liberals*: they are strategically embedded in the articulation between academia, top political and business sectors, connecting local, national, regional and global scales through various networks. I observe these institutions as the main infrastructure of the *liberal* actors in Argentina. On the one hand, these institutions develop essential tasks for the reproduction of *liberals* in ideological, symbolical and material terms: they capture and channel direct funding; offer courses, seminars, conferences (even degrees); provide opportunities for career growth, as they assign scholarships, facilitate internships and connect professionals with private sector companies; frequently organize activities with *liberals*, producing and reproducing the relations that unite the movement. On the other hand, think tanks largely organize and deliver the crucial elements of the political practices of *liberals*: they produce the 'technical' reports and indexes that support the *liberal* discourse on diverse issues; formulate policies; advocate for certain policies through lobbying, consultancy and participation in the media. Moreover, they provide the structures from which *liberals* interact and relate to other groups.

In other words, the networks of academic institutions constitute the most relevant *loci* for the coordination of the practices of *liberals* and, as such, are essential for fulfilling both the universalistic and particularistic functions (Cohen, 1981) of this elite group in the global, regional and national scales they engage with.

The importance of these institutions for elite production and reproduction is most clear when compared with political parties. Various *liberal* parties existed in Argentina during the 20th century but they rarely lasted as active institutions, nor did they achieve significant electoral results⁴³. In contrast to this, *liberal* think tanks and universities have largely outlived those parties. Moreover, they seem to have developed a much more far-flung influence on their local environments. I deem temporal stability and multi-scaled spatial articulations as crucial aspects of the work of these organizations here.

The ideas of liberty

Throughout this chapter I have recurrently mentioned the critical role of 'ideas' for *liberals* and, particularly, the *ideas of liberty* as those which they seek to promote. The reference to the *ideas of liberty* was observed at diverse sorts of activities (events by think tanks, meetings organized by political parties, content by communicators), but it seemed especially recurrent at events among

43 With the exception of the 1989 and 2003 elections, both in the context of full-blown economic and political crises, when they came third.

liberals: for example, seminars on the *liberal* tradition or meetings (i.e. Instagram Lives) between *liberal referentes*. This category points to constitutive elements of the practices by *liberals*, and will be the departing point for my analysis of the frictions in the liberal movement.

To begin with, as mentioned, ‘ideas’ are conceived by *liberals* as the ultimate motivating factor explaining human behavior. In this sense, *ideas of liberty* (from now on, *ideas*) are mentioned by *liberals* as the principles which would guide their own actions, thoughts and feelings. The main pillar of these principles is a conception of individual freedom understood in negative terms (‘freedom from’; chiefly from the state). Individual rights are conceived as derived from the respect to this freedom and, in fact, the role of institutions in a republican system was understood to be about ensuring individual liberty. Among those individual rights that should be protected, property rights occupy a prominent position.

In *liberals’* discourse the individual is presented as the only real agent⁴⁴. During fieldwork I repeatedly observed claims that ‘society’ or ‘class’ are abstractions; and that to consider them as actors lead to distorted views and, ultimately, the oppression of individuals by the collective. For example, this would be the case when it comes to social rights, deemed ‘pseudo-rights’, which would be based in the oppression of a minority whose liberties (in the form of their private property) would be breached through taxation to benefit ‘society’. Such action, it was explained, had to be the product of authoritarian governments that seek to impose a social order conceived rationally and produced in a centralized manner. In opposition to this, *liberals* stress the relevance of the ‘rule of law’, understood as the equal treatment of everyone in front of the law, and they embrace decentralization and the predominance of a social order which they conceive as emerging from each individual’s actions.

Other values are understood as deriving from individual negative freedom. For example, innovation⁴⁵, which would be an unavoidable result of individuals overcoming problems to satisfy their needs. These processes would be most effectively developed in a context of absence of regulations. Regulations, and state intervention in general, are supposed to lead to distortions and sub-optimal results.

However, here an essential issue arises. Ultimately, the worst problem that these interventions represent is not that they lead to sub-optimal results. Going beyond that, *liberals* conceive state interventions as morally flawed, because they would harm individual liberty, for example, because of their negative effects on private property.

44 Interestingly, the only observed exception to this was related to some historical accounts in which the ‘ideas’ were the agent of actions, and individuals appeared as means of those ideas.

45 The history of humanity’s material progress may be explained according to the innovative role of inventors (in earlier times) and businessmen in the last few centuries (see Etchebarne 2019)

“Capitalism is morally superior: it stands for the right to life, liberty, property. That is why its institutions are based on private property, competence, non-intervention, social cooperation, division of labor, where success derives from serving the public with goods of better quality at a better price” (Milei & Giacomini, 2019, 12).⁴⁶

The phrasing '*the ideas of liberty*' always carries a sense of respectability and highness. According to *liberals* 'ideas change the world' and, indeed, the *ideas of liberty* would be those that freed the human condition, leading to a radical transformation of the world since the late 17th century until today ('the ideas that took hundreds of millions out of poverty'). In this sense, the *ideas* are conceived as the highest source of material progress, intellectual enlightenment and moral blossoming.

Sometimes actors pointed to the dynamic character of the *ideas*, which would be related to the fact that they are constantly being refined: even though their origins might be traced to even earlier than John Locke, much had advanced since then. In this sense, Argentinian *liberals* strongly draw on the Austrian School of Economics, among other currents⁴⁷, but also refer national nineteenth-century authors. This alleged continuity, amid dynamism, seems to be the main reason for most *liberals* identifying as *classic liberals* and rejecting the term 'neoliberalism' which is observed as a meaningless term used to attack the *ideas*. However, regarding this dynamic character, it is noteworthy that this was not pointed out very frequently and, on the contrary, the *ideas* were usually performed as a sort of truth.⁴⁸ Thus, in general, the *ideas* were asserted as truths, and clashing ideas were often seen as the product of ignorance or evil -in other words, the outcome of intellectual or moral inferiority.

As mentioned, *liberals* emphasize the role of *ideas*; they mostly seek to transform reality by influencing public opinion, especially elites (political, corporate, academic, media), as not all individuals are seen as equally relevant. Thus, they particularly stress the importance of spreading the *ideas* in universities and the media. *Academic* institutions would be a critical hub for these practices, both for the development and dissemination of the *ideas*. This intellectual work would allow them to spread and produce *ideas* in a pure form, far from the practical compromises that mark the actions of politicians⁴⁹. By retreating from practical *politics*, *liberals* would free themselves from short term

46 The discourse by *liberals* is frequently structured through interrelated series of oppositions: capitalism/socialism, market/State, private/public, liberty/authoritarianism, transparency/corruption, future/past, efficient/inefficient, among others.

47 Morresi (2008) differences four main 'neoliberal' branches: the Austrian school of economics, the Chicago School, the Virginia school and libertarianism.

48 This is not necessarily contradictory: the *ideas* have been, according to *liberals*, empirically demonstrated as a source of progress and enlightenment everywhere they were spread. Minor aspects could be open to discussion and there are different currents among *liberals*.

49 See chapter's epigraph.

interests, being able to focus in the most important dispute, which would be fought in the domain of ideas.

Ideas of liberty as value

So far I have discussed how *ideas* are represented by *liberals* as part of a distinct and preceding domain. This conception is important for understanding how *liberals* make sense of and ‘do’ politics, but such a division is not akin to my own conceptual frame. I understand morality and interests to be dynamic aspects of human behavior -only clearly discernible analytically (Balbi, 2017). As such, *ideas* cannot exist in a vacuum (or in a distinct, eternal and pure domain of ideas), but are constantly reproduced through concrete situated practices – for example, those understood as part of the *cultural battle*. Thus, it is necessary to make a distinction here: for the sake of clarity, I will use the term *ideas* to refer to term used by the studied subjects and ‘values’ to refer to my own analytical category. Even though the concept of ‘values’ is also present in the actors' discourse, the reference to *ideas* was much more common, especially (but not exclusively) in activities among *liberals*.

Value, Graeber notes, is related to what is *desirable* within a group: not only to what people desire, but to what they *should* desire (2001:3). It usually acquires an objectified representation which tends to become fetishized as the actual source of the value it embodies and transmits. It is, therefore, conceived by actors as an end in itself.⁵⁰ Similarly, in the case of *liberals*, the *ideas of liberty* are the reified object from which value seems to emerge.

In this sense, within this group I observed two main sorts of practices related to *ideas* which were particularly valued: studying *ideas* and spreading them.

Training in *ideas* was frequently emphasized as indispensable for being a *liberal*: for example, *liberals* often stressed that it is not possible to become versed in liberalism only by watching videos on Youtube, but that it is necessary to actually read the authors. Moreover, criticism of the ‘liberals’ poor understanding of *ideas*⁵¹ was a recurrent form of discrediting *referentes*. Beyond these frequent statements, the importance of training in *ideas* was evident in the practices developed by *liberal* actors both at think tanks and parties. I observed plenty of activities focused on (the training in) the *ideas*: courses, lectures, articles, books, and, at a higher level in the *liberal* hierarchies, *academic* conferences.⁵²

50 For example, we can think on how value appears to come from money, or fame and glory seem to emerge from the bracelets and collars exchanged in the *kula* (Graeber 2001).

51 And even discrediting other *liberals*, although not frequently done manifestly in public contexts.

52 At a meeting organized by a think tank which gathered the most prominent *liberal* politician and the most prominent *liberal academic*, Alberto Benegas Lynch (Jr.), the latter called to “continue with the cultural battle and assign most of

Nonetheless, individuals with a lay understanding of the *ideas* may also be somehow appreciated, although to a lesser level. This is related to the second sort of valued practices: spreading the *ideas*. *Ideas* are performed in lectures, publications, discourse, policy making, etc. and these activities may be valued to greater or lesser degrees. Drawing on Hayek's metaphor, as ideas descend through the pyramid reaching larger audiences, they are mobilized by 'secondhand dealers' who are not really trained in abstract forms of the *ideas*. The *liberal* conception of political change that departs from an elite and reaches other actors necessarily implies a more heterogeneous 'liberal' fringe, which might be relatively valued but not part of the *liberal* elite themselves. In fact, *liberals* sometimes claim that, up to a point, liberalism is accessible to individuals via common sense.

In contrast to these lower forms of spreading (or understanding) the *ideas*, higher forms of performances do relate to preeminent positions among *liberals*. The most valued *liberals* were sometimes referred to as *champions of liberty*, a category that was reserved to those that excelled in the spreading or defense of the *ideas*. During observed activities, some individuals that received this compliment were Alberto Benegas Lynch (Jr.) and Javier Milei. After passing away, champions of liberty may be the object of tributes. It is very common to see tributes to important *liberals* among think tanks' activities -frequently not Argentinian. Also, often the opening panels at conferences are named after a renowned late *liberal* that was related to the organizing think tank.

Robbins' (2012:120) understanding of values as conceptions of good/desirable which arrange other elements 'into hierarchies of better and worse or more and less desirable' may be fruitful for my analysis. I distinguish two main axis in the valuing of performances (and, thus, performers): purity and practice. These two axis will be useful in order to observe the different evaluations between performances that are conceived both as morally and practically good (e.g. developing the *ideas* in a 'pure' form in an *academic* context) from what could be practically good/necessary but also morally risky (e.g. *politics*)⁵³. Further, regarding purity, there were substantial differences when it came to the higher and lower character of the performances by different actors⁵⁴.

It is not hard to observe a resulting hierarchy among *liberals*, accompanied by a sense of distinction (Bourdieu, 1996) which differentiates both well reputed *liberals* from those less recognized, as well as *liberals* from non-*liberals*, although ranked according to their relative proximity in the 'social space'. In

the time to the library, to studying, to perfect ourselves, and to spread the ideas: the moral basis and, above all, ethical and aesthetic of liberalism, economical, historical and juridical aspects"

53 This will be thoroughly analyzed in chapter 4, section 'Protecting the ideas in 'the mud of politics''.

54 This is a main element of the frictions between renowned *liberal academics* and certain 'liberal' communicators. It will be analyzed in chapter 5.

connection to the supreme moral and intellectual status of the *ideas*, *liberals* continually create and re-create relations processed in terms of moral and intellectual hierarchies.

In addition to the relations among *liberals*, this also became clear in the context of the *cultural battle*, where *liberals* frequently addressed their ‘populist’ antagonist as characterized by inferiority both in intellectual (i.e. as ‘ignorants’) or moral terms (i.e. ‘authoritarian’, ‘corrupt’). On occasion, certain *liberals* criticized this representation of superiority as arrogant, either questioning the alleged superiority itself or its productivity in the context of a political dispute⁵⁵. Moreover, this sense of distinction revealed itself to be a point of friction with ‘liberals’, who sometimes criticized these practices as ‘elitist’.⁵⁶

In any case, the conception of the *ideas of liberty* as transcendent and part of a different (superior) domain appears to be strongly related to the practices and reproduction of *liberal academic* circles. For example, this is the case regarding the emphasis on readings, and the value put in the purest forms of *ideas*. Moreover, the spreading of *ideas* was sometimes observed as an element of personal satisfaction by *liberal referentes* -something which was in clear contrast to *politics* as something undesirable which they might do temporarily for altruistic reasons. The closer position of the *academics* to the *ideas* (in their pure, supreme, form) appeared to be connected to the internal hierarchies among *liberals*. *Academics*, especially those that are active members of the transnational networks of institutions, tended to be more respected and attentively listened to than those more loosely related to the *academic* institutions.

It seems interesting that during fieldwork I did not see public questioning to this hierarchy by other *liberals*. Two interrelated aspects could be highlighted here. On the one hand, *liberals* are mostly reproduced as such in those networks of institutions, in which the *ideas of liberty*, and the system of values they relate to, could then be incorporated by actors that do not continue their careers in *academic* institutions. In terms of Bourdieu (1998, 80), these could be seen as social agents who have embodied a host of practical schemes of perception and appreciation that function ‘as instruments of reality construction, as principles of vision and division of the universe in which they act’. Thus, *liberal* researchers, policy makers, professors, scholars, intellectuals in general (the most established actors in the movement) could acquire and spread the *ideas* as part of the reproduction of the *liberal*

55 For example, at an observed event, the responsible of Students for Liberty, a network of young *liberals*, stated: ‘we really believe in a more popular liberalism, far from the canapés and into the streets (...) we do not have big fortunes, our liberalism is more street-based’. Further, the director of a think tank (who is also involved in *politics*) mentioned at an interview with another institution ‘*liberals* must roll up their sleeves and stop believing they are the best in the world, those that have answers to everything (...) we must sit down and negotiate with people that we ideologically would never talk with and understand that there is some reason in their arguments’.

56 This is analyzed in chapter 5.

movement. In fact, ‘liberals’ who do not get to liberalism through the established system of *liberal* reproduction were less keen on this view and sometimes criticized *liberals* because of their ‘elitism’. On the other hand, the frame on morality I proposed observes it as necessarily related to actors’ interests (Balbi 2017). In this sense, actors *should* observe group values in order to develop a career in relation to *liberal* institutions and actors (i.e. access the resources and contacts they broker).

The political practices developed by *liberals* to transform reality are classified by them in two categories: the *cultural battle* and *politics*. While the former would be connected to spreading the *ideas* and transforming society’s values, *politics* appears as focused on government and access to it. At this point it is possible to make further comments on this distinction drawing on Robbins’ work (2012). The *cultural battle* is closely related to the clash of ideas. The domain of ideas is superior to that of politics: not only because it encompasses it (as political disputes would ultimately be defined in the clash of ideas) but also because *ideas* are there performed in a pure form⁵⁷. In the *cultural battle*⁵⁸, the *ideas* would be performed in a manner closer to their ideal (fetishized) form, which actors conceive as the most supreme source of intellectual and moral value. On the contrary, *politics* is a relatively inferior domain -as it may be noted through the quotes at the beginning of this chapter. In certain historical moments, *liberals* may find *politics* ‘necessary’ (or, perhaps, more acceptable) to transform reality and overcome Argentina’s decadence. However, as *politics* necessarily implies certain pragmatism, it would be a terrain in which the *ideas* are performed in an impure, degenerated manner. In fact, while *liberals* claim to be passionate about the *cultural battle*, references to *politics* emphasize its filthy character (‘the mud of *politics*’). Thus, the strategies developed by *liberals* in *politics*, will be the object of next chapter.

57 These two dimensions of the superiority of the domain of ideas over the domain of politics may be analogous of the observed axis in the valuing of performances: practice and purity.

58 Lectures, conferences, publications, etc.

4. Political parties

We lament to communicate that, due to the conversations between Espert's campaign team and Dr. Alberto Asseff (...) and given [the latter's] political antecedents and the ideas commented by people connected to him, contrary to the ideas of liberty -of which we are not only convinced but consider as a form of life and only road to individual and social prosperity (...) we find ourselves forced to abandon Espert's presidential bid.

Javier Milei, Gustavo Lázari and others – March 6th 2019

When we were together at a party of *liberals* in *La City*, he mentioned to me his project of competing as a presidential candidate. To this, I answered that, in my view, we are so far behind in the debate of ideas that still there is not enough of a basis to achieve a reasonable amount of votes, and that his proposal brought me the question on what would have happened to the world if Einstein, instead of devoting to physics, had been the mayor of Chivilcoy.⁵⁹

Alberto Benegas Lynch (Jr.) - Open letter to José Luis Espert, July 2019

A few years ago, Barry Cannon (2016) pointed out that the main ideological project associated with the Latin-American right is still neoliberalism. However, laying his roots on Luna and Rovira Kaltwasser (2014), he stated that the right-wing political strategies usually did not follow the arduous political party construction but non-electoral strategies (such as lobbying or influence through think tanks) and non-party based electoral strategies, essentially via the construction of leaders represented as outsiders to politics. Even though these strategies are complementary rather than contradictory, the current party-formation process may signal a turn in the political practices of these actors.

Here I present some elements of *liberal* parties, seeking to draw their similarities and differences. Then, I analyze the frictions between actors of the liberal movement with contrasting positions regarding conservatism. Finally, I go back to the *liberal* hierarchical distinction between the domains of ideas and politics, in order to understand how the *ideas* permeate the actions of *liberals* in *politics*.

As mentioned in chapter 2, many *liberal* parties had recently been created or re-founded at the time of fieldwork. In relation to this, in January 2020 Yamil Santoro, the President of Mejorar, eloquently stated at a party meeting that "liberalism is undergoing an arms race". During fieldwork, these parties alternatively engaged in relations of competition and cooperation. Most of these frictions, at least in their public dimension, lasted until November. Before elaborating on that, a discussion of Table 2 (see Appendix) will help to grasp some similarities between *liberal referentes*. While more data could have been included, the table is aimed at summarizing a few key findings. Some elements catch the eye here. To begin with, the absolute absence of female *referentes* in the higher ranks is remarkable. There was

59 *La City* refers to the financial district in the City of Buenos Aires; Chivilcoy is a town in the Province of Buenos Aires.

also a clear majority of males in lower ranks, although less marked in the case of Mejorar than in the rest of the parties, according to my exploratory observations of them. In fact, at the founding event of Uni2, Etchebarne bluntly stated, ‘we need more women’ and invited all the attendance to applaud the few present women.

Furthermore, the correlation between participation in *liberal* institutions and roles as *referentes* becomes evident here. While a few of those in the table may not be part of *liberal* institutions, they may have participated as speakers and events at them. Also, these tend to be some of the actors of this group with longer trajectories in *politics* (e.g. Luis Rosales, Darío Lopérfido).

Individuals somehow related to *liberal* institutions but not considered to be so prestigious as to be integrated into think tanks’ academic or consultive councils are *referentes* (i.e. Manuel Adorni, Gustavo Segré, Miguel Boggiano). These individuals managed to capitalize on their regular participation as pundits in the mainstream media, becoming popular as individuals. Their rise as *referentes* is more related to this than to their performance of the *ideas*. Criticism in relation to this was observed; however, in public contexts it was usually not direct⁶⁰.

Though perhaps unsurprising, the strong predominance of economists is noteworthy. As commented earlier, this is related to the historical production of the *liberal* elite in Argentina and the institutions through which these are reproduced.

Mejorar: ‘politicians doing liberalism’

On November 9th, messages through two Mejorar Whatsapp groups and the institutional mailing delivered big news for the liberal political scene. Four liberal political projects coalesced into Republicanos Unidos. For presenting the alliance and obtaining media coverage, they had decided to take a picture together, along with party members, in front of the national Congress.

The signed agreement expressed concern regarding the state of republican institutions and the rule of law in Argentina, and sought to promote the ‘unity of action’ of those who pursued growth through ‘the ideas of liberty’. The coalition held advantages for each of them: the end of their costly (in terms of time and energy) disputes, their territorial and functional complementarity... and the guarantee that they would be able to compete in the 2021 legislative elections, as the party formation process revealed more arduous than some of them had expected.

That afternoon, a crowd of around 70 people gradually gather in the plaza across Congress; most dressed rather formally. Besides those from Mejorar and referentes of all parties, I recognize the director of the Naumann Foundation in Argentina. While referentes briefly converse with each other (and all of them seem to find time to approach Ricardo López Murphy at some point), the rest of the attendance does not mix as much. I stick with the group of Mejorar, some of whom I had not met yet.

60 More on this on chapter 5.

Someone makes a joke about a young man who arrived in a Javier Milei-themed t-shirt - it is funny, because Milei is competing against the new coalition. A few minutes later, the photoshoot starts. Many photographers cover the event. The first pictures include only referentes. Gradually a few of them intend to adopt a less solemn pose: Etchebarne and a few others show their thumb and forefinger in an "L" (as in liberal) to the camera – a gesture popularized in the 1980s by the leader of the UCEDÉ. After that series, everyone in attendance joins the photoshoot. López Murphy remains in the centre of the group, surrounded by the main referentes of other parties; the rest spread throughout the crowd.

More pictures are later taken, including one featuring the main referente of each of the four parties and four women. Of the latter, I only know one from Mejorar. Later that day, I learn that this was a picture of all those who had signed the coalition agreement: a man and a woman by each of the forces. In that conversation, Mejorar members comment that they did not know the rest of the women either.

Finally, the event comes to an end and I join a group of Mejorar going to the party's office some blocks away. During the walk I listen to the conversation between Carlos and Luis. I already knew Carlos, as he is the responsible of Mejorar's 'judicial activism' - which formally is part of the party's think tank, Fundación Apolo. This (likely the area that most frequently gets media coverage to Mejorar) focuses on denouncing events of potential corruption. Carlos' activism did not start at Mejorar; he used to be a member of the UCR. However, as he commented at a previous meeting, he left, as he disliked the centrality assumed by feminism in it. On the other hand, Luis had administrative responsibilities at Mejorar.

Carlos and Luis converse on the recent US elections. The former appears to tacitly welcome Biden's victory, as he criticizes the 'damage' done by Trump to republican institutions. On the other hand, Luis argues that the elections were rigged against Trump. He says that, contrary to what some believe, Trump was not a protectionist, but in favor of the free market - he would have only ended an asymmetrical business relation with China. After comparing the 'nefarious' Obama with 'the kirchnerists', Luis points out that, politics-wise, Trump is a conservative, and so is he himself. Carlos answers that he is not a conservative and that he cares more about those political positions than the economic orientation.

I interact with some other party members. Lucas tells me that he was part of the PRO for 10 years, even working as an official in the Buenos Aires City Government. However, now there would be too many peronists in it; that is why he joined Mejorar, which would be the most similar party to what PRO used to be. He portrays himself as very gorila, a usually derogatory term for being 'anti-peronist'. Catalina tells me that she is devoted to environmental issues, especially when it comes to agrarian topics. In fact, she is Vice President of the youth group of the Sociedad Rural Argentina - the association that gathers Argentina's largest landowners since 1866. She observes that politics is too dirty, and a change is very much needed.

Once in the office, everyone spends a few minutes checking their social media feeds and media outlets, looking for repercussions of the event. They discuss the article by La Nación, which refers to an alliance by 'libertarian' and 'centre-right' parties. Most dislike being referenced as 'libertarians', some think that it is done to undermine them. The main issue seems to relate to the fact that they identify as 'liberals'. Nonetheless, the fact that the term 'libertarian' is keenly associated with Espert is also raised. Espert's decision to compete in the 2019 elections, diverting some of the votes that would

have gone to the Cambiemos coalition, is something that a part of the Cambiemos' base bitterly remembers -and in Mejorar they know that they aim at that same base.

Someone asks Yamil Santoro, the party president, whether the difference between liberals and libertarians is philosophical. Yamil observes that libertarians adhere to *iusnaturalism*⁶¹ whereas liberals are positivists. Thus, liberals would be open to a dynamic conception of truth, which (like Popper) they conceive to be produced dialogically. This would be why libertarians behaved like 'religious fanatics', and their view of every governmental action as oppressive, illegitimate and based on theft. However, he is not particularly worried about being labeled 'libertarian', as 'liberal' would have a negative connotation in Argentina. The rest disagrees.

The conversation turns into a discussion on liberal politics. Milei and Espert would be mad about the coalition agreement. People related to them would have futilely tried to stop the deal over the weekend by finally agreeing to a conversation with Mejorar that they had previously rejected. However, a strategic difference is raised by Yamil: while Milei would be a huge asset for their coalition, and it would be ideal to attract him into Republicanos Unidos, Espert would most preferably be left to wear himself out. [The coalition's surplus of referentes for limited candidacies is not a trivial matter. In fact, it was mentioned to me in an interview with a referente of Mejorar as a reason for disagreement between the parties that later coalesced.] Yamil mentions that the future coalition will need to moderate 'the egos'.



While pondering the coalition, Yamil observes that there are valuable people in Uni2, but that it has organizational problems. Although it's referentes are visible, the party does not function well -contrary to Mejorar. This reminded me of previously observed criticism about certain individuals' overemphasis on popularity on social media, combined with political amateurism. In relation to the latter, an Uni2 referente is exasperatedly condemned for trying to position himself next to López Murphy in the photoshoot; Yamil moved him to the side. Many Uni2 referentes have no previous partisan experience.

61 Juridical doctrine which conceives rights as based on human nature.

At some point the conversation shifts to a musician of cumbia⁶² that recently gained visibility in his criticism towards the government. In social media, many users started to refer to him as a 'liberal'. Franco, a member of the Mejorar youth, mentions that soon before the musician became popular, he had intended to organize an event with him and the party Vice-President. However, Franco acidly says, Lopérfido would have refused 'because he only listens to jazz and classical music'.

A few comments may complete the party picture for my own purposes here. Mejorar was initially created within the Cambiemos coalition when Unión por la Libertad (presided by Patricia Bullrich) merged with the PRO. Both Yamil Santoro and José Luis Patiño were part of that party. However, that was not Yamil's first experience, as he has been involved in partisan life since 2008. Around that time, he also came in touch with the *liberal* Agustín Etchebarne who directed an NGO which precluded his foundation of a *liberal* think tank. A few other members of Mejorar, such as the director of the party's related think tank, have some relation to *liberal* institutions. However, most common trajectories in the party seemed to point to membership at other institutions (parties) identified with republicanism rather than liberalism, chiefly those in the Cambiemos coalition (UCR, Coalición Cívica, PRO).

This fact is relatable to Mejorar's deliberate pragmatism. The party's *liberal* identity may only be publicly emphasized if it is deemed beneficial at a given situation. As I was told in an interview, they are 'Politicians doing liberalism, not liberals doing politics', which would difference them from all the other *liberal* political projects. Thus, it is stressed that the party is open to anyone willing to work effectively under its principles, no matter if they identify as social-democrats or conservatives. On the whole, the party's foundational and organic documents would be largely modeled on the principles of the Liberal International and the German FDP.

This openness to non-strictly liberal political identities is, in practice, something unusual, according to the observations made during fieldwork. Most forces related to liberalism would emphasize the importance of the *ideas*, and many of these parties' activities would be related to training on them. As such, non-liberals would gradually be excluded. In contrast, Mejorar activities oriented to the training of its members were rarely related to doctrinal topics, but to the acquisition of concrete skills and understandings on how *politics* actually work. This was the objective of the various meetings of the Mejorar's youth group with politicians and officials (most of them related to Cambiemos' administration) held along 2020. Also, I took part in Mejorar's course for training its members in territory-based *politics*, which had a similar take.

62 Dancing genre chiefly associated with lower classes.

Moreover, Santoro presents himself as a ‘professional politician’, something heavily criticized at the Libertarian Party, according to an interview I held with a former member. Unlike most *liberals* who usually refer to *politics* as something undesirable with which they would not want to be related anyhow (although they claim they might intervene temporarily in order to transform it), Santoro refers to politics as a critical form of transforming society. Santoro’s focus on *politics* is not an obstacle for his training in *ideas*. Apart from participation in *liberal* institutions (see Table 2, Appendix), during fieldwork Yamil held online Friday night meetings on *liberal* philosophy with Alejandro Bongiovanni⁶³ - other *liberals* and party members sometimes joined in too. There, his competences on *ideas* were clearly performed. The ‘Mejorar whiskeys’⁶⁴ involved thematic discussions from a *liberal* perspective, while the participants simultaneously had sophisticated drinks - whiskey, rum, wine. Interestingly, unlike all other activities, these meetings were not time-bounded, they often lasted around three hours, and the participants had plenty of time to elaborate their views and discuss authors. This was representative of a sense of highness that surrounds the references to ‘*ideas* of liberty’.

During various internal party activities, Mejorar was described by its *referentes* as ‘liberal-liberal’: not only *liberal* in its economic stances⁶⁵ but also in its ‘social’ views, when it came to drugs, prostitution, euthanasia, gun ownership, etc. Moreover, it had standpoints on *liberal* feminism and environmentalism. Regarding abortion, the party has an open position, as they state that there are good *liberal* arguments both in favor and against it. Personally, Santoro expresses himself as pro-choice and has held a ‘discussion’ on the topic with Alberto Benegas Lynch (Jr.) via articles displayed on the website of the Cato Institute (Benegas Lynch 2019b; Santoro 9/12/19), a prominent actor in the transnational *liberal* networks.⁶⁶

These positions are presented as unusual, as they went counter the long-standing relations between *liberals* and conservatism. At a meeting with potential new members in January 2020, for instance, a young man with painted fingernails stated that he had passed through many ‘liberal and libertarian’ spaces and that they were full of ‘fascists’ and ‘Nazis’. While he did not mind whether other people disliked homosexuals, he found unacceptable their ‘going around with a club and a torch’. Similarly, I observed some tense interactions in the Mejorar Whatsapp groups, for example when a person sent a

63 Alejandro Bongiovanni, director of public policies at Fundación Libertad. He graduated as a lawyer at UNR, and later completed a Master in Economy and political sciences (ESEADE).

64 Despite their name, it was pointed out that they were not party meetings and they were later uploaded to Yamil Santoro’s personal Youtube Channel, not Mejorar’s.

65 Specifically, the party adheres to ‘social market economy’, closely related to German ordoliberalism. Santoro has sometimes quoted the UCEDÉ leader Alsogaray, who stood for the same current.

66 However, the party’s representative in Congress (elected through Cambiemos) abstained in the abortion vote alluding formal issues.

'joke' about a feminist woman being fat, who was then condemned by other members, including Yamil. Sometimes, other users called on everyone to stop arguing over 'lesser issues' while the country was being ruined.⁶⁷

It may be relevant that none of Mejorar's *referentes* are economists. In my observations, individuals whose training in *ideas* was not keenly related to free market positions were, often, much more emphatic on individual liberties beyond the strictly economic – also a bit more prone towards Ayn Rand, though not all of them. This was not limited to *politics*, but also *academic* contexts. However, while the *referentes* of Mejorar hold significant ties with the PRO and other parties in Cambiemos, they do not completely rule out alliances with the catholic nationalist right-wing NOS either - though neither do they especially favor it. Regarding that possibility, a young member of Mejorar told me that he 'would rather shoot himself in the head' than campaign for the retired military officer that leads that party. While he could tolerate (without really backing it) discussions on the number of people *disappeared* by the 1976-1983 dictatorship, something that Mejorar's Vice-President actively does, he would not campaign for someone with homophobic and transphobic positions. Plus, he dates a feminist and most of his friends hold progressive stances, he explained to me.

*Partido Libertario – CABA*⁶⁸:

The Buenos Aires district branch of the Partido Libertario is led by José Luis Espert, the 2019 *liberal* presidential candidate, and since 2020, by Javier Milei, both of whom are economists. The third main *referente* is Luis Rosales, the only one of them with significant experience in politics. Rosales was elected a provincial representative by a liberal-conservative party in 1989, at 23. Later he occupied different roles in the State administration. In 2013 was a legislative candidate by the PRO. All three of these *referentes* have signed the so-called 'Carta de Madrid', a document chiefly initiated by Santiago Abascal, leader of VOX, and Eduardo Bolsonaro, son to Brazil President Jair Bolsonaro. This document states that a part of Ibero-America 'is hostage to totalitarian regimes of communist inspiration, supported by drug trafficking and third countries'.

A brief vignette may be useful for illustrating the Partido Libertario-CABA, the main group in the Avanza Libertad coalition.

On November 3rd I joined a meeting at a park in an expensive area in Buenos Aires, which was one of a series of party events around the City of Buenos Aires and the Metropolitan Area of Buenos Aires. While waiting for Espert, Milei and Rosales to arrive, I take a look to the crowd gathering in a Tuesday

67 In fact, eventually the chat was renamed from 'Mejorar social chat' to 'Social chat'. A disowning that implied that the views presented in it were unrelated to the party's stances.

68 This is a dissident branch of the Partido Libertario that coalesced in Republicanos Unidos.

noon. Approximately 80 people, mostly teenagers, are present, including 15 women: some of the latter are part of the organization. A couple of 'MAGA' (Make America Great Again) caps can be seen in the crowd, in the eve of the US presidential elections. Most of the attendants seem to be on their own; a few appear to be with a friend or with their mothers.

Around 12:30, the speakers arrive after visiting shop owners in the neighborhood as part of the activity. The crowd surrounds the speakers as they walk towards a small stage prepared for the occasion; in their path, Milei and Espert greet everyone bumping fists -also Rosales, but the crowd is not looking for him as much. Shortly after, they are on-stage, microphone in hand.

The first to speak is Rosales himself. He starts by stating that, unlike other parties, theirs is a party of 'people that work, that earn their own living'. As such, they had concerns about doing a meeting on a Tuesday at noon; however, they decided to do it anyway and that it was not only for those present at the park, but also for those that would see it later on social media.

Immediately after, he mentioned that the US elections would be that day, and asked the crowd if there were any Biden's supporters, which was answered with a loud 'no'. Rosales continued 'We should stand as allies of the part of the world that is dear to us, we are sons of western society, European, transposed into America with variations, because here it is mixed, but our values are Western. Then he refers to the US as the 'lighthouse' of those values and states that he dared to say so because the time of 'political correctness was over'. Rosales ends his speech calling the attendants to convince friends, siblings and parents. 'Everyone is liberal, but they are confused after years and years of brainwashing'.

Next to him, Milei stressed that they sought to bring those values, based on free markets, to overcome 'a hundred years of continuous decadence since Argentina decided to embrace socialist values'. In opposition to 'the values of socialism', which would be 'envy, hate, resentment, inequality in front of the law, theft and murder', western values (those of liberalism) would be superior 'morally' and 'productively'.

Lastly, Espert thanked the attendants for their support in the previous year's elections and called to participate in the next campaign. He especially mentioned the importance to participate in the count of votes on election day and, to a lesser degree, to convincing others. Then, he stated that all of the speakers had entered 'the swamp of politics', 'pausing their intense working lives', in order to create 'a more just country... but not for damn social justice', but just in meritocratic terms. The only way to do so would be for Argentina 'to embrace the ideas of liberty': 'not only freedom of expression, religious freedom, freedom to choose gender, which we like so much! But also economic freedom (...) do not feel embarrassed to talk about economic freedom (...) that is the key to prosperity'.

All three speeches together lasted 20 minutes. As soon as the clapping stopped, Rosales asked the crowd 'Do you want to take a selfie or not?!' Almost all the attendants formed a line to get a picture with the speakers, who stayed until everyone got their photo. Later that day, it was possible to see many of those pictures in the social media of Milei and Espert, who shared those that tagged them.

This vignette is useful for illustrating the main lines of the party's discourse and the role assigned to political activism both on grassroots levels and social media, as well as hinting at who is at their bases. In that regard, the importance assigned to social media interactions (both in discourse and in the event

dynamic itself), and the reduction of physically based activism to a few instances, especially overseeing the electoral process, was noteworthy.⁶⁹

*Diverse strategies*⁷⁰

After the formation of Republicanos Unidos, the *liberal* political scene became clearer. As in the 2019 elections⁷¹, *liberals* agreed on the fact that the context represented a window of opportunity for strengthening their influence as political actors. However, there were two main strategies in this sense.

On the one hand, the largest part of the *referentes* and institutions related to the liberal movement believed that *liberals* needed to construct a political force capable of being a critical player in a wider coalition with the Cambiemos' actors by 2023. The actors backing this alternative were critical of the Cambiemos' government⁷², but considered that an isolated *liberal* party has no possibilities of winning the elections in 2023 and that they could not afford to divide the opposition in the face of what they perceive as a totalitarian threat. The think tanks' preference to the 'republican' alternative could be perceived in their regular activities with them. Among this group, there were actors that sought to consolidate a *liberal* force (Republicanos Unidos) and then coalition, and a minority which were part of an internal current at the PRO – I rarely observed these actors at activities by think tanks.

On the other hand, other *liberals* considered that the Cambiemos government was 'socialism' or 'well-mannered kirchnerism'. Thus, they advocated for competing against the two main coalitions. These actors, as Milei, often identified claimed that their objective was to destroy the system from the inside, presenting themselves as linked to anti-system practices and against political correctness.

Intermediate positions between the aforementioned seemed to finally fall to one of them: for example, Uni2, had settled an agreement with Avanza Libertad little before turning overnight to Republicanos Unidos. In any case, this division should be seen as part of a dynamic scene informed both by diverging views and the paths preferred by each actor for their personal growth in a context conceived as political window of opportunity. All in all, the assessment of Cambiemos emphasized its internal differences. All *liberals* were very critical of the more moderate wing of that coalition⁷³, but

69 Regarding other stances, Espert expressed himself in favor of the legalization of abortion in 2019, but in 2020 changed his opinion and joined Milei in his opposition to legalization of abortion by the Argentinian Congress. Perhaps significantly, abortion is a red-line for the right-wing NOS regarding their alliances.

70 More displacements happened after fieldwork ended. I only analyze the data I produced by December 2020.

71 See chapter 2.

72 Although some of them may praise its geopolitical realignment or its 'respect towards republican institutions'.

73 See page 25.

most (even 'libertarians') usually held positive opinions on the pro-polarization leader of the harder wing, Patricia Bullrich.

Some philosophical differences may influence the observed difference between the actors favoring these contrasting strategies. Those advocating for coalitioning with Cambiemos in the future were more prone to identifying as *classic liberals*, while those against all major coalitions often identified as *libertarians* -more in the right-wing terms of Murray Rothbard's paleolibertarism than in those of Ayn Rand (Stefanoni 2021). In this sense, while the former favor the existence of a State with restricted functions, the latter are minarchists in the short run, and against the existence of the State somewhere in the future. It was interesting that disagreements between currents of liberalism were not usually brought to the fore in public contexts as the reason for *liberals'* frictions. However, the actors' frequent calls for *liberal* unity *beyond* their intellectual differences could be seen as hinting that these actually were, to some extent, a source of disagreements.

Regarding the role of the nationalist right in projected coalitions with *liberals*, it is relevant that it was not absent, but rather was part of a field of tensions among actors. The populist enemy was conceived as an existential threat that needed to be vehemently fought, allowing for certain political strategies. Thus, as mentioned, *liberals* often emphasized the need to construct a coalition to save the republic from the abyss of a totalitarian derive. This view allowed for the conception of different sorts or relations with the nationalist right. Avoiding political categories (or politicizing mental ones) for the common identity of this potential coalition, Ricardo López Murphy called to create 'a coalition of the sensibles' -which tacitly referred to the government as non-sensical, intellectually inferior. While this did not necessarily exclude the nationalist right NOS, neither did it include them. This perspective pointed towards Cambiemos as the main partners against/with whom they would define their positions and strategy. Differently, *referentes* of a *liberal* party expressed themselves in favor of coalescing with the nationalist right party in a 'centre-right' alliance.

Liberprogres and liberfachos

I have already commented on the relation between *liberals* and sectors of the conservative and nationalist right throughout Argentina's history in chapter 2. Similarly, I have pointed out that since 2008 the liberal-conservative and the nationalistic-reactionary families of the Argentinian right started to converge again in political actions as demonstrations (Morresi, Saferstein, Vicente 2021). At any rate, such a closeness with conservative stances is not evenly distributed across the liberal movement.

On the contrary, the friction between individuals with more ‘progressive’ or more ‘conservative’ views was significant, and it did not exclusively involve the ‘liberal’ fringe, but also *liberal referentes*.⁷⁴

During fieldwork, two neologisms were used, both by ‘liberals’ and *liberals*, to poke adversaries within this opposition: ‘liberprogressives’ [*liberprogres*] and ‘liberfascists’/‘libernazis’ [*liberfachos*⁷⁵/*libernazis*]. To begin with, *progre* is a term used contemptuously in Argentinian politics to refer to left-leaning individuals concerned with topics like inequality, feminism, gender issues and ecology. In this sense, *liberprogre* is a category used to criticize individuals who may be favorable towards free markets, but embrace ideas and values which are perceived by right-wing actors as a product of ‘cultural marxist’ infiltration, such as pro-LGBT, pro-choice (i.e. Márquez & Laje, 2016). Moreover, *liberprogres* were sometimes accused of being ‘cowards’, lacking the guts to fight the left and, thus, bound to fail – unlike Donald Trump or Bolsonaro.

On the contrary, some *liberals*, and especially those deemed *liberprogres*, emphasized that liberalism is a holistic philosophy, which cannot be segmented; thus, it would not be possible to be ‘liberal in economic matters and conservative in the cultural/social sense’ – a common line in the liberal movement. Thus, *liberals* with more progressive stances sometimes pointed out that there were many conservatives or right-wing individuals who identified with liberalism out of shame.⁷⁶

These positions were the most common in Mejorar. At an interview with Matías, a young member of Mejorar who had previously been in other spaces related with liberalism, he said:

I believe economic liberalism is great (...) [but] liberalism should go into the debates in which the left today predominates. They tell you ‘how come you are going to the LGBT parade? There they are all leftists with signs of Che Guevara!’ (...) thus, liberalism gets away from those spaces to avoid ‘benefiting the left’, and I, as a liberal, am in favour of same-sex couples, legalization of marijuana (...) but I end up silencing myself for not ‘benefiting the left’. (...) it happens a lot that it is a space in which you may be attacked for thinking otherwise (...) that happened a lot with the [discussion on] abortion; a lot of hidden *fachos* came out at the same time in which liberalism was becoming fashion and they went all into liberalism. If you know Gloria Álvarez⁷⁷, she always mentions that ‘there are conservative wolves disguised as liberal lambs’ (...) I am very *liberprogre*. Then, everything that was a bit progressive was ‘leftist’. Being gay was deemed ‘leftist’, unless you were a rather *facho* gay.

74 In fact, there are *liberal* actors who observe the *ideas* as connected to Catholicism, a central element in vernacular conservatism, as is the case of the Acton Institute. More research on these actors would be important, however, from exploratory observations on some of their institutions and articles I observed an emphasis on liberalism and Christianity as constitutive of the ‘western culture’, in which Argentina would be embedded through its Hispanic legacy. Some of the *academics* related to this sector of the *liberal* movement lecture at Catholic institutions, as the Universidad Católica Argentina and the Universidad Austral.

75 *Facho* is a term used laxly to mean ‘fascist’. Its use may resemble that of ‘bigot’ in English-speaking countries.

76 Open identification with the right is uncommon in Argentina, which holds a negative connotation through its association with the 1976-1983 dictatorship - although it appears to be changing in the last few years (Saferstein and Goldentul 2020).

77 More on Gloria Álvarez in page 70.

In my observations, the most heatedly debated issues regarding this line of tension were a) the governments of Donald Trump and Jair Bolsonaro, and b) the national debate on abortion. However, I never observed *liberal referentes* in *politics* being too inflexible on these topics, even when they were personally closest to stances accused of *liberprogre* - which probably is a minority. Among the *liberal* elite, hard stances on these topics were only observed by individuals who may participate in events by *liberal* institutions and debates on the media, but not in political parties.

This is even the case in the ‘liberal-liberal’ Mejorar. In the campaign towards the 2019 elections, Mejorar had conformed a coalition (Republicanos) in which it converged with ‘right-wing liberals’ that admired the Trump administration. During observations at party meetings and interviews, this experience was remembered as problematic by members of the party, as some of the people that entered the coalition was unjustifiably aggressive in daily interactions and ‘did not work politically’. For example, it was pointed out that some of them sought to influence internal decisions by attacking the party's stances on social media, or that some of them insultingly criticized those in the area of *liberal* environmentalism, claiming that environmentalism ‘is a hoax by leftists’. Another clash with these individuals took place when they organized an activity with the General Secretary of VOX in Buenos Aires. They sought, without success, that it was sponsored as an institutional event by Mejorar -and remained disappointed that it was not. Shortly after the elections this group abandoned the party. Mejorar members decided that they could try to coalition with individuals and groups with those positions in the future, but that they would no longer attempt to include them in the party itself. Thus, the contrasting stances on these issues played a subordinate role in the preferred alliances by *liberal referentes*, even those holding more progressive positions; however, they were not free of fueling uneasiness and interpersonal frictions.

Further, the comment by Matías in the fragment quoted above contains another interesting element. In his experience in liberal spaces he found himself silencing his (liberal) opinions to avoid being pointed a ‘leftist’. This dynamic may not be reduced to individuals participating at the lower ranks of political parties; during fieldwork some *liberals* were heavily questioned by users on social media when distancing themselves from right-wing views. For example, this was recurrently the case with Iván Carrino, who observed that ‘when I argue that the New Right is homophobic because of its arguments against gay marriage and same-sex adoption, a social media army of trolls brands me cultural marxist, liberprogre or, simply, communist’ (Carrino 2021). This individual is not linked to any party, but the dynamic he describes here might influence other actors as well, in a process that fosters

actors of the liberal movement to displace to more openly anti-leftist stances and bridges distances to other actors in the right-wing.⁷⁸

Regarding the *cultural battle*, it will be useful to introduce a relevant distinction regarding how it is produced by different actors according to this line of tension. On the one hand, individuals favorable to progressive positions sometimes observed that neither feminism, sexual diversity, nor ecology were inherently ‘leftist’, but that the left had managed to appropriate those areas even though they were historically linked to liberalism. Thus, the *cultural battle* should seek to dispute this.

As the German local representative of the Naumann Foundation mentioned to me in an interview⁷⁹:

Through the influence in schools, universities, in most of the media, culture, theater, maybe cinema (...) most of the images are related to the left, for example regarding the concept of individuality, society, economy (...) that is why the cultural battle is very important, not only for conservatives but also for liberals, for the liberal centre and the rational centre (...) I, we, do not accept that topics as [women] emancipation, environment, cultural tasks, should be monopolized by the left. Historically, women emancipation has been a liberal topic; historically the protection of environment in Germany has been a liberal topic, but through the years the left turned these issues into their monopoly. (...) human rights in Germany and other countries has been taken by the left, why? It is a liberal creation (...) the cultural battle means to take back and redefine these topics, images, narratives, and to give them a liberal content.

Further, regarding ‘right-wing populist’ leaders, he mentioned:

‘Trump is in favor of free market and lowering taxes, and so is Bolsonaro. But, from my point of view, this cannot imply that we accept all the rest that they say (...) because they may be more liberal than the left in terms of economic policies (...) but their conception of liberation, (...) politics, family, individualism is unacceptable for liberals. Well, their style is unacceptable for liberals: it is a populist style, clearly anti-liberal.’

In contrast to this, instead of redefining those frames, individuals that embraced rather ‘conservative’ positions focused on countering the discourse and narratives which they associated with a ‘left-wing hegemony’ and ‘political correctness’, such as feminism, LGBT, environmentalism, condemnation to the 1976-1983 dictatorship. In some cases, as in Milei’s appearances, these were even related to ‘cultural Marxism’, and other actors charged against alleged ‘Marxist indoctrination’ in schools.⁸⁰

78 In relation to this, at an event I observed at Mejarar’s office in January 2020, Yamil Santoro drew comparisons with the Spanish political system. He pointed out that his own positions were closest to those of Ciudadanos, whereas other *referentes* were closest to the Partido Popular. Despite these hues, Santoro stressed that to succeed they needed to communicate as VOX. While at party’s events and Whatsapp groups he was moderate and questioned those that criticized others members from radical right-wing positions, in social media he often maintained a more ambiguous discourse.

79 It is noteworthy that all the observed European *liberals* that featured at events of academic institutions held views most similar to those of *liberprogres*. In the case of *liberals* from United States the positions were more heterogeneous.

80 Moreover, individuals with rather progressive stances were often accused of being ‘cowards’, lacking the guts to fight the left and, thus, bound to fail – unlike Donald Trump or Bolsonaro.

In relation to this, it is crucial to mention that openly conservative actors also conceive themselves as conducting a *cultural battle*. The *cultural battle* by conservatives differs from that of *liberals* in many critical points, such as in its ultimate objectives, the causes of the decadence they seek to overcome, etc. For these actors, economic decadence would be a consequence of the cultural and moral corruption. However, both these *cultural battles* hold important similarities, such some of their perceived main antagonists (i.e. ‘the left’, ‘feminism’) or their intentions to debate established historical narratives (i.e. regarding the 1976-1983 dictatorship). Thus, besides some noted differences on their specific content, during fieldwork the *cultural battle* appeared as the common frame for the practices of different sectors of the Argentinian right-wing, which displayed displayed their practices and narratives in a *continuum*⁸¹.

Protecting the *ideas* in the ‘mud of politics’

In the previous chapter I observed that *politics* is represented by *liberals* as a domain inferior to that of *ideas*. The latter not only encompasses the former but, what is more, it is understood as pure, in contrast to *politics* filthy character. The impure character of *politics* would represent a risk both for liberalism and, thus, for *liberals* participating in it. First of all, I must observe the importance that *liberals* awarded to the protection of *ideas* in their political practices: short term practical compromises, a necessary part of *politics*, might spoil the public’s opinion on liberalism -the *ideas*, as such, cannot be spoiled.

So, to begin with, *liberal* parties rarely included such identification in their names⁸²: I could mention Mejorar (‘To Improve’), Recrear para el Crecimiento (‘Recreate for Growth’), Uni2 (‘United’ - originally Partido Nuevo [New Party]), Republicanos Unidos (United Republicans), the Republicanos coalition (Republicans) and, in previous times, Unión del Centro Democrático (Union of the Democratic Centre), Partido Cívico Independiente (Independent Civic Party) and Nueva Fuerza (New Force). Exceptions to this might be the marginal and short-lived Partido Liberal Libertario, the still existing Partido Libertario-CABA and the coalition the latter leads, Avanza Libertad (Liberty Advances) -it might not be just coincidence that all the exceptions are related to relentless *libertarians*.

The intention to preserve *ideas* from the oscillations of *politics* was made explicit by a renowned intellectual at a meeting I observed. Reflecting on the preferable political strategies for *liberals*, he stated that if a party was to be named 'Liberal', ‘people would soon start asking *liberals* if they were liberals as in the party or liberals as in liberalism’, which was a consequence of the pragmatism implied

81 See page 25 for reference to Cambiemos’ take on the cultural battle.

82 The opposite is evident regarding think tanks. See Appendix Table 1.

by *politics*. Thus, in the political arena *liberals* often emphasized their identity as ‘republicans’. More so, while the *referentes* of the emerging *liberal* parties are clearly identified with liberalism, the bases of them might consist more of individuals linked to traditions closer to republicanism, conservatism or anti-Peronism.

Liberals intervening in politics are more prone to be publicly questioned by other *liberals*. In this sense, it is crucial to observe the recurrent disowning of individuals and political processes which were, in fact, started by members of *liberal* institutions. This disowning is a relevant practice, frequently delivered by *liberals* to restore the purity of *ideas* after its corruption in *politics*. It usually emphasized that the referred process was not *liberal* as it did not comply with all the due elements -it was not pure. This is particularly clear in the efforts deployed to detach liberalism from what are often conceived in Argentinian public discourse as ‘neoliberal’ governments, such as Macri’s (2015-2019), Menem’s (1989-1999) and the military junta (1976-1983) (see Canelo, 2008; Vicente, 2011; Bongiovanni 2011; Visión Liberal 2020 -as well as countless fieldwork observations).⁸³ *Liberals* regularly state that these were not *liberal* governments, and that if the intervening officials identified as *liberals*, it was not relevant, because their policies, at least some of them, were not. In other words, they were not pure enough

The only consistently praised *liberals* that participated in governments are those related to the constitution of Argentina as a modern state in the 19th century. These *liberals* would have fueled the country’s golden era, in which Argentina would have become overnight one of the richest countries on earth.⁸⁴ In contrast, I have observed praise for Alsogaray, leader of the UCEDÉ, for the liberal surge in the 1980s, but not as much for his role in the 1990s when he allied with Carlos Menem’s government or in the military governments in mid-20th century.

Here the political productivity of the separation between the domain of *ideas* and the domain of *politics* for the protection of *ideas* becomes clear. The fact that liberalism is identified with *ideas* (instead of with what *liberals* do), as well as the short-lived and discontinuous character of relevant *liberal* parties, allows for the actors to adopt stances which pretend to project *liberals* as morally and intellectually superior to other actors in *politics* or the *cultural battle*, no matter the concrete results of *liberals* who acted in positions of responsibility. In this sense, the protection of the *ideas* through the separation of domains, and practices like the referred disowning, are critical for maintaining the (purported) distinction by *liberals* as intellectually and morally superior to other groups and, thus, their

83 Similarly, I have not observed tributes dedicated to 20th century *liberal* politicians, although I did observe many tributes to Argentinian *liberal* politicians of the 19th century.

84 See chapter 2, section ‘Elites in the foundation of the State’.

mystification as an elite (Cohen 1981). The continuous narratives that connect contemporary *liberals* with figures of the foundation of the modern national state and their steady growth in the late 19th century, are also important for the projection of the *liberal* elite as actors that will, once again, drive Argentina into prosperity in the future. Therefore, the historical references by *liberals* are significant for the presentation of their universalistic functions that legitimize their roles as elites. In contrast, *liberals* perceive other narratives, for example, those based in the (contemptuous) category ‘neoliberal’, and the administrations associated to it, as untrue and damaging to their cause, and actively seek to refute it.

However, even though disowning and criticism are clearest against those in office, even as they still are in it, any *liberal* intervening in *politics* with a certain visibility appears to be susceptible of criticism by others. Interestingly, this is the case of Milei himself since he started campaigning with José Luis Espert in mid 2020. Ever since becoming a public figure Milei has been characterized by his aggressive style, aimed mostly at ‘populists’, ‘leftists’ and ‘Keynesians’, but sometimes also at other *liberals*. This behavior, which used to be criticized only by a few *liberals* before he entered *politics*, on some occasions became the object of a more widespread criticism by *liberals* after his engagement in the Partido Libertario -CABA⁸⁵. Also, a previous intimate *libertarian* friend (and co-author) of Milei started condemning him for intervening in *politics*, which rendered him a ‘parasite’ like the people he criticizes, and an authoritarian figure that intends to rule over others like a ‘Nazi’.

As such, *liberals* that do participate in *politics*, unlike those in virtually any other role, often justify themselves for entering ‘the mud of politics’, by, for instance, emphasizing that their income is chiefly related to their work in the private sector, not public money. For example, this is the case even for Yamil Santoro, who atypically identifies as a ‘professional politician’ but still underlines that he manages a few companies⁸⁶. When referring to his participation in *politics* at a meeting of Mejorar, Santoro reflected on his creation of the party as part of his intention to ‘bequeath an institution’ to Argentina. Other *liberals* may represent their incursion in *politics* as a) a sort of (temporal) personal sacrifice to overcome Argentina’s decadence; b) a consequence of the impossibility to trust in politicians, which would render preferable for *liberals* to deliver the much needed reforms themselves; and c) in the case of *libertarians*, as a means to destroy the system from within.

85 Partially, this criticism could also be related to the fact that Milei decided to intervene in *politics* alongside Espert and not with the majority of *liberals*, who sustain the ‘republican’ strategy.

86 In fact, many aspects of Mejorar’s internal dynamic were produced in corporate terms. For example, they contracted a *manager*, party’s activities were thought of in terms of ‘offering services to our members’, the party’s course on political activism was branded as a course on ‘political entrepreneurship’, the diffusion of the party was part of ‘political marketing’ and ‘branding’.

Anyways, besides public declamations, it is interesting that at observed restricted meetings of two different parties, two *referentes* casually aired their political ambitions: one of them fantasized on competing as a presidential candidate in 2026, while the other one hypothesized with satisfaction that, a decade from then, he would not have strong *liberal* competitors in *politics*.

During the 2020 ‘arms race’ between *liberal* parties, the need for unity was declared by almost all the actors. Simultaneously, many *referentes* called the rest to unite -under the umbrella of the party they themselves presided over. These practices, as well as the creation of new *liberal* parties when similar ones already existed, were criticized by other *liberals* as a product of ‘egos’. This criticism towards ‘egos’, observed as an obstacle for an effective participation by *liberals* in *politics*, was widespread and probably all those intervening in *politics* were accused of it at some point of fieldwork⁸⁷.

In this sense, if individual ambition usually appears as a more than legitimate motivation for *liberals*, it seems that it is not necessarily the rule in the case of *politics*. Inversely, political participation is often justified in altruistic terms, and individual ambition (‘egos’) is an object of criticism. The transition to *politics* appears to involve a reduced flexibility in the options of *liberals* to act as such in a manner acceptable to group values.

All in all, although productive in a sense, the group’s values might also be seen as a constraint difficult to overcome for *liberals* in *politics*. As presented by Ricardo López Murphy, the most respected contemporary *liberal* politician, *liberals* in *politics* should avoid two mistakes: sectarianism and ‘following along’ [*seguidismo*]. This pair can easily be seen in terms of the acceptable degree of pragmatism/purity. On the one hand, ‘following along’ would imply too much flexibility. On the other hand, sectarianism would be a lack of pragmatism, which would also be a problem, as *liberals* would risk not taking advantage of their window of opportunity -and associating the *ideas* to ruinous political results. This position, which was similar to others by *liberals* in *politics* in conversation with *academics*, appears to acknowledge the importance of standing by the *ideas* while, simultaneously, claiming more autonomy for those in *politics* who are prone to being easily questioned for not complying punctiliously with the *ideas*.

Reflecting on this issue as a problem that *liberals* face, at an Instagram Live with the director of another think tank, Gerardo Bongiovanni stated:

87 However, at Mejorar, individual ambition was also manifested as positive for party’s growth when it came to the party’s lower ranks. In this sense, it was claimed that everyone could become a *referente* and a candidate if he/she worked for it, and internal democracy was conceived as the main pillar of the party, founded by individuals that lamented previous experiences at parties in which they were not allowed to compete due to the decisions of the parties’ cadres. Anyways, as a small party, Mejorar needed to develop other *referentes* besides the party authorities to subsist. Also, during fieldwork, a group of members (including one of Mejorar’s founders) left the party criticizing the lack of internal democracy.

“There is a sort of misunderstanding between us, that are part of the world of ideas, and those that are in *politics*. (...) Those that are in *politics* say ‘that people do not get involved [*esa gente no se moja*], they live in a comfortable world and do not set a foot in the mud’. There is some reason in them. Those of us that are in the world of ideas we say ‘well, those guys bring too much mud on them, they do not care about the ideas, they lack principles, they are too pragmatic, to say it lightly’, and we are also partly right.”

More generally, *liberal* politicians (not every *liberal* in *politics*) emphasize that the objectives of *politics* differ from those in the academy, and so do their respective practices. While *academics* are able to pursue abstract and ideal formulations, *politics* would be a territory in which possibilities are constrained, and actors must necessarily negotiate and move towards what is only relatively better.

The transposition of *liberal academic* logic to *politics* was often deemed problematic not only in regards to declaimed positions and alliances, but also in terms of internal party construction. In this sense, during fieldwork I observed numerous references to the ‘liberalometer’ [*liberalómetro*], a neologism that demurs the search of purity in non-*academic* contexts. The ‘liberalometer’ points towards a dynamic that makes people uncomfortable and ultimately expels them from organizations for not being ‘*liberal* enough’.⁸⁸

Regarding Mejorar, its main *referentes* actively sought to construct a different dynamic, claiming that the party was open to everyone willing to work within its mainlines, from *libertarians* to *peronists*, and that no-one would measure the members’ ‘liberalism in blood’. In this sense, I did not directly observe the practices related to the *liberalometer* in action, but this issue was recurrently brought up by individuals arriving to Mejorar from other *liberal* parties, as well as in various other observations (including think tank events) and interviews.

Certain aspects of liberalism as an identity may be clearest through the *liberalometer*. The *ideas* represent values that *must* be pursued; moreover, being ideal, these values cannot be finally reached. However, in their practices *liberals* seek to reproduce such identity. Consciously or not, ‘being *liberal*’, as an identity that has a moral charge, appears to be desirable in itself and more important than (risking that identity while) spreading liberalism.⁸⁹

The problems regarding the *liberalometer* as an extended practice might have up-scaled in the context of the recent popularization of liberalism in Argentina. However, it is worth noting that I have

88 In fact, according to a few observations, it appears that even *liberals* become expelled, as part of discussions on who is *really* a *liberal* or not. This is a topic which would deserve further research to determine the relevance of the differences between *liberal* currents in their interpersonal relations.

89 This resonates with the practices of many (usually low scaled) left-wing groups in which ‘being left-wing’ appears as an objective itself of their practices and militants may be disqualified as ‘petty bourgeois’ at any time. Anyways, in this latter case it is more curious, as that identity would supposedly be oriented towards certain praxis, not ideas as such.

observed a reference to the *liberalometer* as an obstacle for the political unity of *liberals* in a post from 2013, at a blog in which many contemporary *liberals* used to write (Corbat, 2013).

Everything considered, despite *liberals* conceive the transformation of reality as something that is most efficiently done by ‘spreading of *ideas*’, their marked preference towards ideological purity (and often anti-popular positions) do not tend to create strong political forces in the Argentinian presidential system. More so, currently *liberals* with significant experience in partisan *politics* are a rarity -many of those that entered ‘the mud of *politics*’ recently are part of think tanks and/or of the recent rise of *liberals* in the media. This fact may be perceptible in the actions by some *referentes*, who sometimes communicate in ‘entertaining’ forms (as comical/critical videos) that might be effective for popularizing an individual in social media but are perceived by *liberal* politicians as lacking the seriousness that a party construction demands. Also, inexperience by *referentes* has sometimes been pointed out⁹⁰ as the cause of a disproportionate interest by them on the social media, particularly Twitter, in their political work; individuals with vaster experience in *politics* may observe it as utterly insufficient for creating a competitive national political force with capacity to participate in government and, even, a deficient form of perceiving the public opinion.

Thus, regarding political strategies by *liberals*, it is worth remembering the discussed in the previous chapter regarding Patricia Bullrich, the now leader of the PRO who is not a *liberal* but has held multiple and intense ties with actors of the *liberal* movement over the last decade. *Liberals* have regularly supported coalitions identified with the opposition to ‘populism’. Even though some *liberals* seem to have developed efforts oriented towards the construction of *liberal* parties over the last decades, the consolidation of these projects has been limited to periods of marked political and economic crises (1989, 2002... perhaps 2021). Apart from these, *liberals* have mostly relied on (non-*liberal*) ‘friends of liberty’ to actually conduct the reforms which they promote through the *cultural battle*.

In fact, *liberals* in Mejorar seem to be reduced to some of its main *referentes*. Even its Vice president is chiefly identified with republicanism and anti-Peronism, has been part of the UCR and has no previous participation in *liberal* institutions. Moreover, among Mejorar ranks I observed many members (if not most of them) who enthusiastically identified with the party’s republicanist stances (transparency, limited executive power) but seemed to be a bit less passionate in their ascription to certain liberal principles, for example in relation to free market. Moreover, among young ‘liberals’ the

90 For example, at meetings organized by a *liberal* think tank.

identification with liberalism frequently appeared as equaled with anti-leftism, conservatism or the right-wing.

5. Media

The *cultural battle* is primarily related to overcoming the allegedly dominant ‘populist’ values and ideas. Here, diverse practices are framed by *liberals* as part of the *cultural battle*, such as participating in traditional and social media, creating content for YouTube, publishing books and articles, doing podcasts, teaching in academic institutions, participating in congresses. Many of these practices have been performed by *liberals* for at least half a century. In fact, even though the notion of *cultural battle* among *liberals* may be traced back to a book by Chilean-German *liberal* Axel Kaiser (2014 [2009]), the practices classified under that term are similar to those of the ‘debate of ideas’ which *liberals* called to deliver during the 20th century.⁹¹

I have already discussed the practices by *liberals* related to the *academia* when it comes to the spreading of the *ideas*. The aim of this chapter is to approach some of the most relevant aspects of the ongoing transformations of the liberal movement. In this sense, here I will focus on the emergence of new *liberal* and ‘liberal’ *referentes* and the main frictions this change is fostering.

From experts to polemicists

Liberals have a long-lasting trajectory on ‘traditional media’ (written media, radio and TV): many of the observed actors, usually economists, participate very frequently on the most visited media outlets in Argentina (Infobae, La Nación, Clarín) and their related radios and TV channels (LN+, TN, Radio Mitre, etc.), as well as in other, relatively smaller outlets⁹². Many *liberal* economists participate in the traditional media emphasizing certain principles conceived as technical and derived from the *ideas*, such as opposition to taxes, orthodox interpretations of inflation, among others. This phenomenon, however, seems to be taking a new turn in recent years. Some *liberal* economists started to perform a more aggressive style in their defense of the free market, taking distance from the role of ‘neutral’ economic experts. This ‘neutral’ style had been observed as a critical difference between the ‘modern neoliberals’ that came to prominence in the 1980s and the traditional liberals, as seen in chapter 2 (Beltrán, 2005; Heredia, 2004; Morresi, 2009). While the latter often made declarations of principles, ‘modern neoliberals’ sought to present their views as technical. In this sense, this transformation in the style of the actors’ intervention seems to signal deeper transformations.

91 Actually, a few *liberals* have recently argued that they prefer the latter term (Carrino 2021; Rojas 2020).

92 Smaller liberal-related media also exist, both regarding traditional and digital media, and blogs. Also, there are some well known journalists with connections to the *liberal* institutions; a few of these participated at events organized by think tanks during fieldwork.

The change in these public interventions largely followed Milei's boom in popularity⁹³. In this fashion, some individuals started to complement their presentations in the mainstream media with a strategic use of social media, where they upload the 'hottest' moments of their appearances, i.e. the moments when they supposedly 'smash' their adversaries. These include plain criticism (sometimes outright insults) aimed at politicians, Peronists, leftists, Keynesians, and others.

One of the *referentes* that became popular in this way, Manuel Adorni, summarized certain points about his TV appearances at a meeting of the Uni2 party, which he is part of. There, he observed that Milei had paved the way for other individuals like him, but that if they went out of fashion or stopped getting audiences for the channels they feature in, they would no longer be called to participate in debates. Thus, he considered necessary to communicate the ideas but, overall, he had to remain attractive. A cameraman had taught him the key to success in the media, he argued: 'it does not matter what you are asked about, the important thing is what *you* say, people only remember that'.

Various accounts on social media and Youtube were created in recent years to spread the appearances of these individuals - some of which were not limited to *liberals*, but to a wider right-wing opposition. These uploaded videos usually carry names like 'Javier Milei destroys politicians' or 'Adorni wrecks the despicable Peronism that endures in government and ruins the country'. Sometimes they have capital letters on the verb and references that indicate that the person acted out of anger ('explodes', 'bursts', 'gone mad').

It is noteworthy that, in addition to cultivating this style, these actors seek to project an image of superiority in terms of knowledge and education – something dear to public appearances by *liberals*, as seen in chapter 2. For example, in a single appearance Milei may mention multiple authors (often referring specific chapters of books), technical terms for describing certain phenomena, or methodological aspects, such as regressions that he might have done in a projection of his. This superiority is even bluntly asserted⁹⁴: during debates these *referentes* sometimes refer to their adversaries as 'ignorants' or 'donkeys', an informal term for brute.

According to the interviews I conducted with young members of Mejorar, it was the (rebellious) style of these interactions that caught the interest of the youth rather than the expressed ideas. In the words of the *referente* of Mejorar's youth group:

I always say that, in my view, liberalism interests the youth more because of its anti-system presentation than because of its ideas. I think that is why Milei was so successful, because of that 'let's set the Central Bank on fire', and not as much because of liberalism. (...) liberalism in Argentina managed to capture that sense of rebellion, which I do not agree it is about, but many

93 See page 26.

94 In my view, most of these actors seldom perform any form of intellectual superiority, but only assert it discursively.

boys feel that way (...) when you want to address a boy who is not interested in politics (...) you must have some epic, you must take distance of the old liberal school of guys like Etchebarne and Ricardo López Murphy. They may be the ones to conduct [the movement], but they won't reach the youth. (...) [on the youth] ideologically there is a bit of everything. There are many people that are very purist in their liberalism, and with an emphasis similar to that of Milei where, I perceive, they absorb everything that Milei says, they repeat it, but they do not understand it. That is why I mean that they are caught by the anti-system message rather than by the ideas themselves. There are many boys talking without any training on the relative subject (...) and when you listen to them, they are saying stupidities [*burradas*], stupidities, stupidities, lack of data, lack of information, lack of everything.

Another young member of Mejorar said:

I believe that Milei was the one who made the difference, both because of his style and, more or less, for agreeing with the stuff he said. I think that 60% of the young people such as me that now are liberals arrived here because of Milei, because it was fun for us to see a crazy economist, with his messy hair, on TV, insulting all the people that we thought were sons of bitches. That was big, and then all the people of the liberal think tanks tried to get on that train in whichever way they could.

While the rise of these *referentes* is generally perceived by *liberals* as part of their advances in the *cultural battle*, the recognition given to these individuals is not universal. Some value their ability to reach wide audiences, especially composed of teenagers and young people. However, I sometimes observed criticism regarding a) the simplified version of *ideas* that they communicated and, b) their 'authoritarian' forms or style, sometimes even in their disputes with other *liberals*. Except for very specific cases, this criticism rarely explicitly questioned their character as *liberals*.

Whatever the quality of their performances, for *liberals* these individuals play a part in a more general scheme in which political change is ultimately conceived as dependent on the ideas, and the latter are seen as spread by 'secondhand dealers'. In fact, this is also the case for other actors that, unlike the aforementioned, hold no direct previous relation to *liberal* institutions, such as influencers and Youtubers. Drawing on Hayek's pyramid metaphor⁹⁵, as ideas reach larger audiences, they may be mobilized by secondhand dealers who are not really trained in their abstract forms. As I will show, this does not mean that these are completely disconnected from *liberals*; but their training, forms of legitimization, audiences, and ambitions may differ. *De facto*, the *liberal* conception of political change that departs from an elite and reaches other actors necessarily implies a more heterogeneous 'liberal' fringe. A secondhand dealer

[N]eed not possess special knowledge of anything in particular, nor need he even be particularly intelligent, to perform his role as intermediary in the spreading of ideas. What qualifies him for his job is the wide range of subjects on which he can readily talk and write, and

95 See page 29.

a position or habits through which he becomes acquainted with new ideas sooner than those to whom he addresses himself (Hayek 1949:372).

These positions and habits are partly fed by the action of *liberal* institutions. However, ‘liberals’ are neither part of the *liberal* elite, nor do they necessarily have to legitimize themselves in front of them. They may benefit from their relations with *liberals*, but they are the subjects of their own ambitions; this becomes clear through their relations not only with *liberals* but also with other actors of the right, as well as their recent apparition as speakers in political meetings offline.

Thus, besides *liberal referentes* in the media, it is necessary to further present other actors (i.e. Youtubers) to grasp the recent surge of liberalism among a segment of the youth.

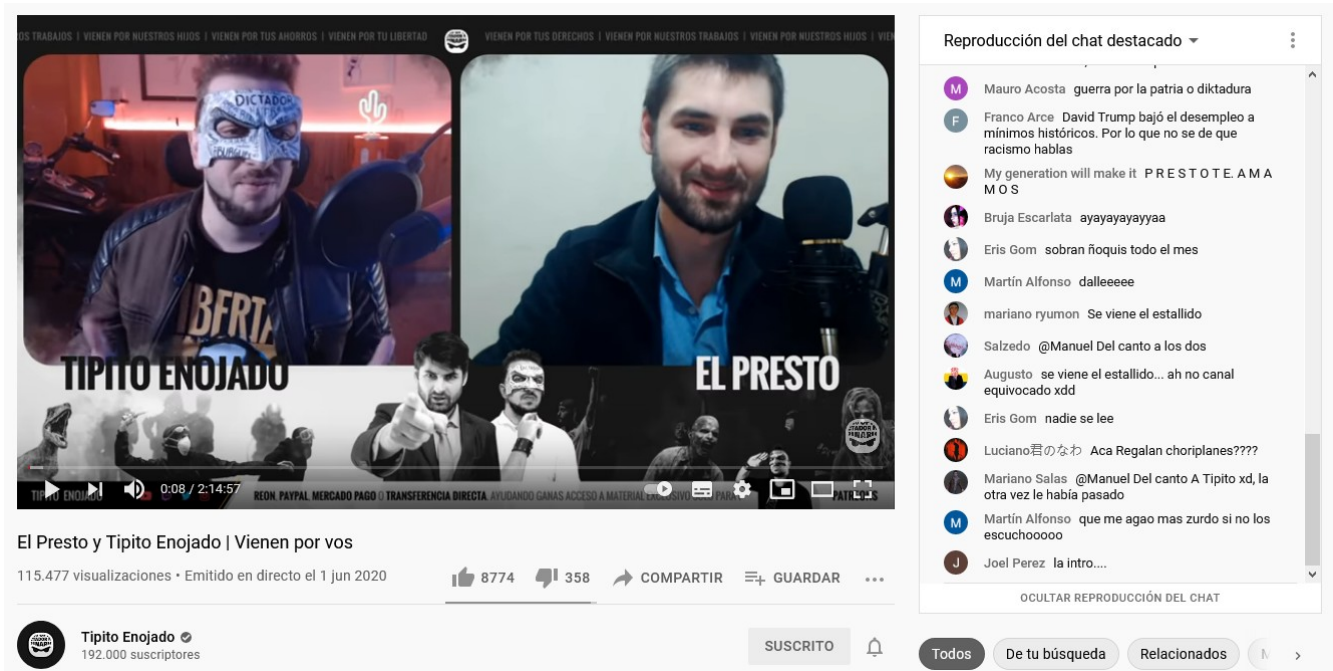
Alternative communicators

June 1st. A Youtube livestream between Tipito Enojado [Angry dude] and El Presto through the former’s channel. Their streaming is named ‘They come for you’. The interface shows both individuals live, in a frame created by Tipito, who is a graphic designer. The lower part of the graphic has an image of both of them, El Presto with an angry face pointing his finger to the camera, and Tipito with a hand on his chin. On the one side next to them, one can see zombies; on the other side, there are some individuals rioting next to a dinosaur. Below it, there is information on how to donate to the channel through different means and accessing exclusive contents. The upper part of the interface reads ‘THEY COME FOR OUR JOBS | THEY COME FOR OUR CHILDREN | THEY COME FOR YOUR SAVINGS | THEY COME FOR YOUR LIBERTY | THEY COME FOR YOUR RIGHTS’. On the stream itself, Tipito Enojado is dressed in a leather-like jacket and a black and yellow⁹⁶ t-shirt with the word ‘Liberty’ and an image of Juan Bautista Alberdi – the main inspirer of the Argentinian 1853 Constitution. He carries a mask, his face is not known by the audience, neither is his actual name or exact location in the Santa Fe province. The mask is covered in deprecatory words: ‘DICTATOR’, ‘FACHO’, ‘HATER’, ‘BOURGOIS’, ‘NEOLIBERAL’, are the most visible. Behind him, a motorcycle is visible in a manly room lit up by neon-lights. El Presto’s setting is simpler, just a plain white wall behind him, as he talks and smokes. Unlike other Youtubers who identify as ‘alternative communicators’, El Presto presents himself as a journalist. Both of them are around 30 years old.

The conversation lasts over two hours. It has 115.000 views. They discuss issues of national politics and criticize socialists, feminists, politicians. El Presto hopes for an opposition front that encompasses everything from liberals (as Espert and Etchebarne) to the leader of NOS, led by Patricia Bullrich. Both agree that Patricia Bullrich is a fine leader. Later, Tipito analyzes, ‘Cristina is not a socialist, she is a common thief. (...) Those who apply socialism are not socialists, they are thieves. Socialism is the best system for stealing (...). It concentrates all power and money in the same place and reduces the controls so it’s easier to steal’. They sometimes talk directly to the audience: ‘Do you believe the State is the solution? Let’s play a game. Can the public sector live without the private one? Yes, or no? Can

96 These are the colors of anarchocapitalism.

the private sector live without the public one? Yes, or no? That's it, simple as that'. Argentina, Tipito considers, is following the model of Venezuela.



Later they talk about another popular Youtuber (Los Liberales, by Nicolás Morás) who they heavily condemn for uploading antisemitic content. Tipito and El Presto agree that George Soros is despicable, but that implies nothing about Jews in general. They also talk about Black Lives Matter in the United States. El Presto warns the audience, 'be very careful not to victimize most of the Afro-American community in the US because most of them are very complicated folks, not all'. Tipito gives it a 'structural explanation': Afro-Americans did not start at the same time as whites because of slavery. In many years Afro-Americans would reach their economic status, but in the meantime they are largely in poverty, which makes people prone to drugs and crime. I had already heard an analogous 'structural' explanation by him on the inequalities between men and women.

During the streaming they receive paid comments by some subscribers. Those paid comments are read and briefly talked over at the end of the streaming -over 40 minutes are devoted to it. Tipito also has a Patreon account to get donations, and has a constant relation with his 'community' through his Discord account.⁹⁷

The content made by 'liberal' Youtubers strives to have both an entertaining and informative character towards the audience. It usually brandishes a teenager-like style of humor. They work in a networked way, for example by featuring frequently on each other's channel and even holding events together, sometimes on the eve of major demonstrations by the opposition. However, not all Youtubers are connected to each other, there are at least two main clusters of channels that I noted regularly streaming together - though I only observed the one with connections to *liberal* institutions.

⁹⁷ For two other short vignettes, see Appendix section 'Media'.

These channels (see Appendix, Table 3) also hold frequent interviews with *liberals* (Javier Milei, Agustín Etchebarne, Ricardo López Murphy, Gloria Álvarez), and other right-wing political figures (Patricia Bullrich, Agustín Laje). In this sense, rather than providing stances related to the *liberal* tradition, these channels project a continuum of views chiefly unified by their opposition to progressive stances (as feminism and social justice). While Tipito Enojado unequivocally identifies as ‘liberal’, other communicators may alternatively identify as ‘liberals’, ‘libertarians’, or part of the ‘right’.

There are important antecedents to the rise of *liberals* and ‘liberals’ in alternative media which are worth mentioning, such as the Guatemalan Gloria Álvarez and the Argentinian Agustín Laje. The former is a *liberal* who has done significant work in the popularization of liberalism since 2014: she has wrote popular books (Álvarez, 2017, 2019; Kaiser & Álvarez, 2016), frequently gives talks at conferences and participates in the media. She is identified with libertarianism, and is critical of right and left-wing populism. On the other hand, regarding Laje, even though *liberal* sources from some years ago clearly referred to him as a *liberal*, that characterization was not as clear-cut during fieldwork⁹⁸. Laje is currently chiefly identified with the construction of a right-wing movement in Latin America, supports the nationalist NOS in Argentina and has recently been working with the Spanish VOX. However, some of his positions are close to Rothbard’s paleolibertarianism, and he is a critical reference of the right-wing ‘liberal’ online subculture (Elman 2018; Stefanoni 2021). Both are figures of regional relevance and have regularly featured in content produced by the referred Youtubers.

Another recurrent topic in the videos by alternative communicators was the criticism towards mainstream media as having sold out to politicians, and alternative communicators as the only independent communicators that are not tied to the ‘dictatorship of political correctness’. In relation to this, they present themselves as rebellious against a leftist status-quo. ‘The left is the right, and the right is the left. Nowadays, the left stands with the establishment. The hegemonic media constantly presents a politically correct discourse, progressive’, as Danann (who has over a million subscribers in Youtube) put it in a video. While adopting a language that connects them to countercultures, the content of their arguments actually reinforces dominant hierarchies.

All of these elements hold very strong resemblances with a study conducted by Rebecca Lewis regarding far-right youtubers in United States (Lewis, 2018). However, a crucial difference in this case concerns their relations to *liberal* networks. These alternative communicators sometimes feature at events by *liberal* think tanks, and well-known *liberals* frequently feature in their channels. Most interestingly, an Argentinian think tank, sponsored by the Naumann Foundation, produced a course for

98 Which may point towards the possibility of individuals ‘losing’ their recognition as *liberals*.

training influencers in July 2020. 'Dominating the new media' sought to provide the tools to 'promote Liberty through alternative media' via a course with 15 instructors (7 Argentinian, 6 Spanish, 1 Guatemalan, 1 Colombian). The announcement read 'You will learn communication strategies to establish your personal brand, and on how to connect with the vast network of liberal think tanks and foundations to fuel your message'. The program included lessons on Youtube channels, oratory skills, social media management ('the meme war', Twitter, Instagram), podcasting, participation in traditional media, marketing and interaction with think tanks. Tipito Enojado was in charge of a lesson named 'The aesthetics of your Youtube channel'. This type of practice by *liberal* institutions could be seen as consisting of a double movement which simultaneously seeks to strengthen the *liberal* sphere of influence in the media, while tightening influencers' relations to the *ideas* and the *liberal* institutions.

Another relevant topic is related to the communicators' legitimization. On the one hand, their main asset towards *liberals* is their large audience; upon criticism they may answer 'the market has chosen, people listen to us, not to you'. On the other hand, besides at times unperformed, during my observations the youtubers regularly performed holding certain 'symbolic capital' in front of their audiences, which was often commented upon with a casual air. In this sense, one of them regularly analysed formal fallacies in the arguments of his adversaries, another one emphasized that he was a disciple of a well-known liberal-related intellectual, yet another claimed that he used the 'maieutic' method in his videos. In any case, the alleged characteristic they emphasized the most was their own courage to tell the truth out loud, no matter the pressures they received for being politically incorrect. They would not fear to take a stand against a government portrayed as totalitarian, and called on their audiences to join them in the fight⁹⁹.

During the writing of this thesis, some of these communicators started to carry out public political meetings offline¹⁰⁰. Apart from that, some met with PRO leader Patricia Bullrich (Danann, El Presto, Zicarelli), others were directly part of the PRO. The Instagram account of Danann present pictures of him with both *liberals*¹⁰¹ (as Alejandro Bongiovanni, Javier Milei, Gloria Álvarez), 'liberal' communicators, and individuals related to the PRO more confrontational line. In relation to the this, it has been noted that sectors that used to be part of PRO/Cambiamos have left it and embraced more openly right-wing expressions, but still perceived that force as its 'second best'. Thus, they would alternatively get closer or move further away from it, pushing the party to adopt a more openly right-wing orientation (Morresi, Saferstein, Vicente 2021).

99 See Appendix, Vignette n°2

100 Simultaneously, some *academic liberals* created Youtube channels or podcasts.

101 Both of more progressive or more conservative tendencies.

Women were also scarce among the most popular communicators. An exception was the cosplayer Lilia Lemoine, who was part of the Espert campaign in 2019 and who used to date Danann. Although she holds ‘libertarian’ positions, her account is mostly devoted to pictures of herself, sometimes with a sensual tone. Moreover, other ‘liberal’ women whose names sometimes were mentioned in observations also had accounts, for example on Instagram, where they mainly uploaded pictures of themselves, posing in a similar fashion. In any case, females seem to also occupy a subordinate position in this area, even in comparison to communicators of more openly conservative tendencies, where it is possible to find more catholic women with visibility in their stances. In contrast, there are some *liberal* women that hold a significant presence as communicators, as is the case with Antonella Marty and Gloria Álvarez. Interestingly, contrary to most male communicators, both are critical of ‘right-wing populists’, as Bolsonaro.

The usage of the term ‘liberal’ or ‘libertarian’ by the mentioned communicators (and other users on social media) encompasses a broad spectrum of actors that are chiefly united by their opposition to the ‘left’ and ‘progressivism’, and their support of ‘political incorrectness’. In this sense, in ‘liberal’ Twitter circles, messages supporting figures like Menem, Trump, Bolsonaro or even Argentinian dictator Jorge Rafael Videla are common. In fact, especially at the beginning of fieldwork, a common joke by these users implied telling ‘leftist’ users (for example, a feminist) that an Uber would pick him/her up, with an attached image of a green Ford Falcon - the car model used by the 1976-1983 dictatorship for ‘disappearing’ people. Although the stances of the most prominent ‘liberals’ on Twitter were largely compatible with those of the above mentioned youtubers, I seldom observed cross-references between them, and they seemed to move in different circles. Actors in the Twitter community of ‘liberals’ often identify as ‘right-wing liberal’. Interestingly, two of the most well-known ‘right-wing liberals’ that interact on Twitter appeared at a social meeting at Mejorar, in which I also participated.

At this point it is possible to elaborate on the relations between *liberals* and ‘liberals’ by departing from the following vignette.

Frictions between *liberals* and ‘liberals’

The 9th International Congress on Austrian Economics was held online on October 6 and 7th. This event was organized by two liberal think tanks from Argentina, two from Austria, and with the financial support of the Naumann Foundation. The congress, created in 2006 by an Argentinian liberal think tank and now a traditional venue for the national liberal movement and some of its international partners, held presentations on diverse issues by prestigious academics (mostly from Argentina, but also many from Europe, Latin America and United States) and members of liberal Argentinian political

parties. On October 5th, on the eve of the formal beginning of the Congress, there was a special event hosting five popular liberal-related youtubers from Argentina.

Some liberals¹⁰² criticized that panel through their Twitter accounts. They did so by stressing the lack of credentials of those youtubers for participating in the congress, also pointing to the allegedly insulting manners in which they referred to other liberals (namely, one of the critics). 'They did not need to damage the congress of the Austrian school in this form', tweeted a liberal lawyer, attaching an image of the flyer of the panel. This was answered by a lecturer at UCEMA who lamented 'it used to be an academic congress'. 'They scream like hysterics because they are not recognized for reaching 4000 people on Youtube and think that because of that they made a revolution in liberalism', added a liberal that is part of the academic councils of various think tanks and regularly participates in mainstream media.

Some of the criticized communicators decided to respond the critiques directly. Such was the case of Danann and Álvaro Zicarelli, who besides responding on Twitter, on the following day published a video discussing the topic. Danann claimed, 'So much education, so many numbers, so much data... that is useless (...) now it is our time, without having an electoral base, without having a party (...) without having any of the resources that you had, you, that gave a bad name to liberalism. We are transmitting the ideas through alternative media, through social media (...) we are referents for many young people on the ideas of liberty, the old faces expired'. He considers it to be part of a natural generational replacement. On the other hand, Zicarelli said that the academic liberals were 'always looking serious, with professional profile pictures (...) [sarcastic] not to allow the chance that I don't look like Yale, Harvard [with a forced accent] or Columbia'. Danann adds that through these pictures it is possible to notice that they take Viagra – and other even far more explicit comments. Then both agreed on the academics incapacity to reach people below 60 years-old. 'The market had chosen': they were popular and, on the contrary, nobody cared about the academics' discussions.

Besides their 'mediatic legitimization', both also underlined their own credentials as liberals. Danann claimed (as he often does) that he descends from the main author of Argentina's first constitution (which liberals revere). Zicarelli declared himself to be a disciple of a well-known, liberal-leaning, anti-peronist intellectual -a fact he also regularly mentions. 'We are discussing ideas, communicating them to young people, we are educated (...) we are not idiots'.

It is worth noting that these two communicators hold ties with actors of the liberal movement and participate in liberal events, but their identity as liberals, both by self-ascription and ascription, is not always clear. Both of them are most clearly identified with a right-wing spectrum characterized with anti-kirchnerism and anti-feminism, relating themselves not only with liberals but also with right-wing leaders, mainstream or not. Thus, their views are more characterized by its reactionary tone than by a defined ideology.

Tipito Enojado (Angry Dude), who also participated in the panel, responded to the criticism in a different manner. Instead of stating that there was a natural replacement of academics by communicators, he proposed a synthesis (and a possible hierarchical symmetry) between the groups,

102 Among the liberals that participated in this criticism were 1) an economic consultant that writes weekly in the most traditional news outlet in Argentina and whose late brother was among the first organizers of the congress in question, 2) a nephew of him, who is a member of the Mont Pelerin Society, 3) a PhD In history that teaches at the two most renowned liberal universities in Argentina, ESEADE and UCEMA 4) an economist and a lawyer who participate in liberal think tank's activities and in a liberal party.

as he stated that he conceived his YouTube channel as part of a same path: 'the function of my channel is to be a first step that later ends with important referentes... it is a pity that these look down to us'.

Lazzari, a liberal who participates in think tank events and, recently, in a party, answered to some of the critics: "Robert, Nico don't pay attention to this. You are in another league. Not even a minute for cheap insults". To this, Nicolás Cachanosky, member of the board of directors of the Mont Pelerin Society (2020-2022) and Senior Fellow at the American Institute of Economic Research, responded "It is not personal. There is such a thing as damaging the image of liberalism and of third people. Is this liberalism or is it fanaticism and revanchism?".

There are diverse elements at play in this vignette which will be analyzed in the rest of the chapter. I will mostly focus on the questioning of tacit hierarchies of the liberal movement related to the rise of new 'liberal' referentes. However, prior to this I will make a brief comment on the tensions between younger and older members of the liberal movement.

Young liberals and the snake-emoji youth

As observed in the previous vignette, the frictions between 'liberal' and *liberal referentes* holds a generational dimension. In relation to this, it is important to mention that I have not myself observed relevant frictions between older *liberals* and young people following the established forms of reproduction of the *liberal* movement, such as taking courses in *liberal* institutions. In fact, at observed debates between young members of liberal-related organizations, young *liberals* (who were part of think tanks) were observed criticizing young 'liberals' in similar terms to older *liberals*, emphasizing their aggressive forms and lack of training in the *ideas*.

Regarding the lack of education, it was recurrently emphasized with contempt that in order to become educated in the *ideas* 'it is not enough to watch a few videos on YouTube' and 'to try to emulate Milei': it is necessary to study¹⁰³. Similarly, at many instances I have observed comments about young 'liberals' who copy Milei's aggressive forms, but who have not read nor understood what he states¹⁰⁴. In relation to this, established *liberals* sometimes underline that liberalism is neither right-wing, conservative or anti-system, as many young people seem to believe. Even though alliances with certain conservatives and right-wing groups might be possible for many *liberals*, they underline the importance of not confusing the *ideas* with other philosophical traditions.

All this leads to complex relations between the different groups. While some *academic liberals* often criticize young 'liberals' in the aforementioned terms, it is not clear what the liberal surge would

103 This is exactly the opposite of the view presented by Tipito Enojado at an interview with a *liberal* think tank (see Appendix, vignette n°1).

104 For example, see the quote by the *referente* of Mejorar youth in page 67.

be if it was not because of this rise among the ‘liberal’ youth. In that sense, many of the activities by *liberals* towards the youth tend to shape them, offering courses to train them in the *ideas*. As observed regarding the event ‘Dominating the new media’, efforts to train ‘liberal’ *referentes* themselves are also displayed.

This is also, partly, the case in the activities of the Mejorar youth group, a party which seldom focuses on doctrinal discussions, but whose activities are related to understanding the complexities of *politics* and government, transcending the extended ‘anti-political’ positions, common among ‘liberals’/‘libertarians’ that deem everyone in public offices to be ‘crooks’. In this sense, they regularly meet with individuals with experience as officials (usually in the Cambiemos’ national administration). Anyways, Mejorar also develops other types of activities that may be attractive for young people; for example, the party's youth group first activity was a League of Legends (a popular online videogame) tournament. Many of the members of the youth group at the time of the conducted interviews would have first gotten in touch with the party after this activity.¹⁰⁵

Many young people have, allegedly, gotten in touch with *liberal* institutions over recent times, but the starkest visibility of this group relates to their intense participation in online environments. Online interactions by these individuals are often characterized as aggressive by *liberals*. In fact, it is not unusual at all to observe Twitter users, often identified with snake emojis (in reference to the libertarian Gadsden flag), that present themselves as ‘right-wing liberal’ or ‘popular liberal’, and harshly confront other users, even (or maybe especially) *liberals*, sometimes respected ones. Likely, this is related to the actions of the *referentes* they are more into. As such, they regularly criticize ‘old liberals’ as responsible for ‘ruining liberalism’.

Regarding these aggressive forms, some *liberals* refer to the ones who utilize them as ‘fanatics’, ‘fascists’ and unquestioning followers of a leader. Sometimes this characterization emphasizes that liberalism is a living corpus, which implies individuals to take an open stance in the world, being able to debate. In response, I could frequently observe users justifying their aggressive style as part of their freedom of expression.

Interviewed by a YouTube channel about his opinions on the apparition of ‘young liberals, young snakes [*jóvenes viborita*], in social media’, Yamil Santoro answered:

Young liberals and young snakes are different things. To be clear, currently there is a pugnacious [*contestataria*] liberaloid current, equivalent to the role played by Marxism in the youth. Then, the great news is that we have managed to generate (and there Milei has a central role, many contributed, such as you, to this cultural battle) a sort of centre-right or liberaloid identity current. I think that is beautiful, it did not exist before (...) Now, what is the issue? It is

105 During the writing of this thesis Yamil Santoro started live-streaming while playing Counter Strike Go on Twitch.

something similar to what used to happen to us liberals with people that read Ayn Rand; when they entered the great liberal family through Ayn Rand, they were like rabid dogs (...) they are like 'I arrived to liberalism yesterday, read 3... not even 3 books, I watched 10 Milei videos and I am going to explain liberalism to everyone, you fucking leftist'. (...) it's an adolescent process of defining yourself through opposition, and it's okay, it's valuable.(...)

[On Milei] Intellectually, I have a huge respect for Javier (...) but he makes all the boys rabid. We need him to give us a bit less deranged raw material.

Some of the young people that interact on social media as 'liberals' appear to have supported José Luis Espert in the 2019 presidential campaign, not only online but also in offline activities. However, according to the interviews I conducted with young liberals, these were only a few in comparison to the extent of this group on social media. A young member of Mejorar who had participated in the aforementioned campaign in 2019 expressed that the differences between online and offline activism among the youth are related to a) comfort: social media anonymity would allow them to express whatever they feel like without having to measure consequences, b) disinterest: many people would be more interested in having fun than 'delivering the battle, either cultural or political', c) some people would not have found a place for activism in which they would feel comfortable. In relation to these topics, he pointed out that many young people arrived to some liberal spaces by making alike minded friends on social media (Twitter), or looking for a community to be part of, rather than because of the *liberal* philosophical principles and ideas.

In this sense, in this interview and two others I conducted with young members of Mejorar, it was mentioned that liberalism had become a 'temporary fashion' [*moda*], being something cool among young people. However, in two of them there were contrasting views on the matter. One of them, the main *referente* of the Mejorar youth group, observed this temporary fashion as a window of opportunity to get those young people actually channeled into *liberal* institutions and studies. The other one, who co-creates a 'liberal' YouTube channel, perceived it is a chance to create a more 'popular liberalism', less focused on 'liberal readings' and more on 'common sense' and 'what each one wants'.

Disputed hierarchies?

The *cultural battle* and *politics* are the two complementary paths undertaken by *liberals* to transform Argentina according to their aspirations. From an analytical point of view, it could be stated that these are both part of the political practices of *liberals*. However, the actors differentiate them by emphasizing one particular issue: *politics* implies negotiation and flexibility (and thus it is 'mud', impure), while the *cultural battle* is a field in which the *ideas* can be presented in a pure form. As analyzed in the previous chapter, the production of this distinction is critical for protecting the *ideas*

from the risks involved in *politics*. Therefore, it is essential for maintaining (the pretention of) an intellectual and moral superiority which legitimizes *liberals* as an elite.

This distinction between the *cultural battle* and *politics* was clearly presented by Alberto Benegas Lynch (Jr.) at an event on the *cultural battle* organized by a think tank. There he expressed that

The politician is not someone that can state 'I am going to say whatever I feel like, and I do not care what people understand', because he will not last as a politician. Different is the professor, who would be lost if he stated 'I am going to research on what my students want to learn'. These two functions are substantially different.

In practice, these fields are not discretely separated nor disconnected, but there are mutual interactions. For example, it is possible to observe that a) many individuals engage in both 'activities' simultaneously, and the boundaries between them are not always clear (i.e. *academics* participating in *politics* while directing a think tank), b) the *ideas* in the *cultural battle* are presented in a different light depending on the political strategy pursued by specific persons, or the changing circumstances at play political windows of opportunity, c) either because of group pressure or belief (most likely both), *liberal politics* is often delivered in puristic terms, both when it comes to discourse and party construction (e.g. with the *liberalometer*). Further, certain *liberals* advocate for *political* strategies that do not imply the construction of *liberal* parties, but influence existing forces through internal *liberal* (purer) currents. In this sense, despite certain idealized distinctions between them, the limits between the *cultural battle* and *politics* are not clearly defined. However, even though these interrelations may be consistently argued, they may not imply that the claim of purity in the dissemination of the *ideas* is completely baseless, but that it is only a matter of degree.

Nevertheless, it is possible to observe that when reflecting on the *cultural battle*, *liberal academics* often conceive it through images that relate it to academia: there is talk about professors, lectures, seminars, readings, spending time at the library, researching, perfecting oneself. On the contrary, the alleged purity of the *cultural battle* is hardly defensible when it is produced within the dynamics of social media interactions, whose expansion seem to be the main novelty in the recent *liberal*/'liberal' practices. The *cultural battle* understood in terms of digital media, as observed, is strongly marked by a pursuit related to the tokens of value of those environments: followers, likes, subscribers, retweets, shares, etc. Crucially, it seeks to please certain audiences rather than stimulate their more or less abstract critical reflections on the value of the *ideas of liberty*.

This is not only the case regarding alternative communicators, but also can be observed among *liberals* that constructed themselves as *referentes* via combination of their appearances on mainstream media, with a strategic use of social media. In fact, it may be argued that certain forms of interaction

that frequently characterize viral content displayed in (often anonymous) online environments were, to a significant extent, appropriated by actors to organize their practices in other social spaces. While this sort of behavior did not become autonomous from social media, those practices started to also permeate offline practices to some degree.

I should stress that this distinction between 'models' of *cultural battle*' is only useful for analytical purposes; through it, I do not seek to reify the actual empirical diversity which is continually produced in the practices of situated individuals. For example, during fieldwork I observed references made to Patricia Bullrich as having conducted the *cultural battle* during her time as Ministry of Security – seemingly through her stances in favor of hard punishment. Also, as mentioned above, Milei combines an aggressive style very popular on digital media platforms with references to *liberal* authors. Nonetheless, the distinction between the aforementioned ideal 'models' of *cultural battle* is useful to perceive that the term encompasses different sorts of practices that point towards substantially divergent forms of legitimization.

In a manner analogous to Bourdieu (1996), I propose to think of the legitimacy of actors within the liberal movement as made up of two forms of capital: academic capital and mediating capital. By academic capital I refer to the relative (in comparison to other actors of the field) recognition of an individual's actions and positions regarding his skills in performing the *ideas*: membership in prestigious *liberal* institutions (and the role occupied in them)¹⁰⁶, skilled performances of the *ideas* (lectures, publications), studies, etc. With 'mediating capital', I point to the relative recognition of an individual's capacity to reach non-*liberal* actors, whether they be youth, business sectors, etc. While the overall volume of capital possessed by an individual in the liberal movement is relevant, it is apparent that *liberal* and 'liberal' *referentes* tend to sharply differ in the structure of their possessed capital: the members of the *liberal* elite hold much more academic capital, while 'liberal' communicators tend to hold more mediating capital.¹⁰⁷ These two forms of capital are not equal, but entail a hierarchy, and that hierarchy is at stake in the disputes between actors in the liberal movement. These frictions may be observed in the vignette above on the Austrian Economics Congress, in the relations between individuals that achieved certain prestige through their work in *liberal academic* networks, and individuals who are popular, especially among a sector of the youth - which *liberals* seem to perceive as decisive for their recent surge.

106 In this frame, the membership to prestigious institutions in the *liberal* networks could be seen as reifying an individual's academic capital.

107 Furthermore, the mediating capital of *liberals* seems to be frequently related to other elites (business, media), rather than to vast audiences – potential voters.

It shall be stressed that 'liberals' are often publicly praised by *liberals*. While *liberals* are watchful about the protection of the *ideas*, the role of secondhand dealers is part of their political strategy. I believe that these frictions only become starker when 'liberals' challenge *liberals'* academic capital, for example by occupying spaces that *liberals* (at least some of them) conceive as exclusively their own. This became clear in the mentioned participation of 'liberal' communicators in an *academic* venue, but also during other moments. In their questioning of *liberals* (who they accuse of having spoiled what 'liberalism' is in Argentina), in their proclaimed intentions of replacing current *liberal referentes*, as well as in their implicit claim towards the defining power over who or what is 'liberal', rising 'liberals' seek to transcend the tacit hierarchies sustained by *liberals*. In this sense, the friction between *liberals* and 'liberals', whose credentials are rooted in different practices, may hold a structural character, as the hierarchies of the liberal movement, and how they are constructed, become affected by the apparition of *referentes* who do not follow the expected steps in the reproduction of the liberal movement, or in the acceptance of a relatively subordinated role.

Regarding this friction, it will be productive to briefly consider the topic of mystique. As argued by Cohen,

'mystique is (...) a way of life, manifesting itself in patterns of symbolic behavior that can be observed and verified. The ideology is objectified, developed, and maintained by an elaborate body of symbols and dramatic performances (...) Ideological content and explicit dramatic performance continuously act and react on one another in forming the cult of eliteness (...)

But the cult is nevertheless essentially instrumental, in that it validates the status of the elite in the eyes of the public, and gives the elite the conviction that they are naturally qualified for their position'. (1981: 2-4)

In the case of *liberals*, it is their training in the *ideas*, (in their ethical, political and economic dimensions), which chiefly informs how this group conceives and projects its 'universalistic functions'. *Liberal* eliteness is rooted in their purported superior knowledge to bring moral and material progress to overcome Argentina's 'decadence'. In this sense, it is noteworthy that the criticism by *liberals* to 'liberals' focuses on the elements of distinction on which their mystification is based: primarily in their superior knowledge, secondarily in their acceptable forms for communicating the *ideas*. It must be noted that this criticism is not equally as much related to *liberals* that became popular on social media as it is to the 'liberal' youtubers. However, a certain questioning on the 'simplified' liberalism that these actors presented was, in fact, observed in a few restricted contexts.

Besides criticism regarding education in the *ideas*, sometimes I observed comments that certain styles would be incompatible with liberalism¹⁰⁸. In fact, even well-established *liberals* are questioned

108 See page 57.

about this, and not only in cases of public personal antagonism¹⁰⁹. During many instances, I observed criticism of the forms used by certain popular *liberals* and ‘liberals’, who were scolded for being ‘unnecessarily aggressive’, ‘intolerant’, ‘disrespectful’ or ‘authoritarian’. Moreover, criticism from *liberals* of young followers of ‘liberal’ *referentes* was also common and followed similar lines.

These claims were confronted by ‘liberals’. In addition to their comments on their own (substandard) credentials, their responses emphasized that a) *liberals*’ sophistication was reduced to narrow circles and that they had failed to reach wider audiences, b) they were old and unable to represent newer generations and c) *liberals*’ wariness regarding the new *referentes* was a product of their elitism. Also, regarding ‘liberals’ on Twitter, some criticism towards *liberals* mentioned the reluctance of some of them to openly support Donald Trump, something that was also associated with an allegedly elitist stance. The fact that mediating capital is easier to reconvert than academic capital, making ‘liberal’ communicators capable of moving to other sectors, may not be a minor aspect of their bargaining power within the liberal movement. Moreover, as I previously discussed, these individuals cultivate relations with other right-wing actors.

It is worth wondering whether the rise of ‘liberal’ *referentes* is perceived as problematic by *liberals* because of its potential dangers when it comes to the satisfaction of their particularistic functions - that is, those required for the reproduction of their elite group (Cohen 1981). On one level, the possibility of ‘liberals’ occupying positions previously reserved to *liberals* was not observed as a concern by *liberals* during fieldwork. In fact, *liberals* reproduce themselves, and usually channel their ambitions, through their work in academic institutions or in the private sector, often related to finance. If anything, it seems possible that problems related to the satisfaction of the elite group’s particularistic functions could take place in regard to their roles as *referentes* in *politics*, which was not observed by me – perhaps importantly, neither did ‘liberal’ *referentes* participate in the observed *liberal* parties during fieldwork.

However, on another level, the practices by ‘liberal’ *referentes*, as alleged communicators of the *ideas*, may be perceived as risky by *liberals*. Unlike other secondhand dealers, these communicators do not only spread the *ideas* in a lesser, indirect form, but often speak in the name of liberalism. In this sense, analytically, the potential threat posed by these *referentes* seems analogous to that of *politics*: they may undermine the elite character of *liberals* by performing the *ideas* in an impure form in a context characterized by those *referentes*’ personal short-term interests. In this sense, to some extent they potentially threaten the group’s reproduction as an elite.

109 For example, an anecdote referred by Benegas Lynch (Jr.) at an observed event is interesting. He recalled that at a lunch with Milei he manifested his full support for the latter’s work, but not as much for certain ‘episodes of his language’. After this, Milei would have immediately admitted that Ricardo López Murphy, another most respected *liberal*, frequently told him the same.

Nonetheless, different from those in *politics*, the potential risk to the *ideas* was not as widely acknowledged by *liberals*. Criticism towards them was not as generalized and did not seem to focus on the intrinsic characteristics of their role, but on their specific actions and qualities as individuals – something probably related to them being conceived as part of the *cultural battle*. This may also be perceived in the last paragraph of the vignette. There, a *liberal* reaffirmed the group’s distinction over the ‘liberal’ *referentes*, but minimized the importance of these actors, observing the conflict with other *liberals* as something personal. It was one of the individuals in conflict who emphasized that it was not a personal issue, but that it was about protecting liberalism.

6. Conclusion

In this work I have sought to study the intertwining of morality and political practices in the actions of *liberals*, in a context marked by their growing influence and rising internal frictions. This analysis led me to propose a classification of the field as it is produced through the practices of *liberals*. On the one hand, *liberals* appear as the Argentinian section of a transnational elite strategically located in the articulation between academic, business and political sectors. On the other hand, ‘liberals’ are a heterogeneous set of actors with connections to *liberals*, but who are not part of the *liberal* elite.

The current *liberal* elite follows a formation process that became consolidated around mid-20th century. In Argentina, this process initially involved individuals who had been part of the country’s patrician families, often landowners, and who were related to the national liberal tradition – closely connected to conservatism. The social background of Argentinian *liberals* partially changed through the inclusion of middle-class individuals who had carried out studies (usually in economics) in the United States. Towards the end of the century, *liberals* mostly turned their efforts towards the development of academic institutions which crucially structure their material and symbolic reproduction as an elite. From there, they produced and presented their views as part of an apparently technical, neutral, and superior knowledge.

According to *liberals*, ideas would be the ultimate reason underlying human action and, thus, form a decisive element of political disputes over long periods of time¹¹⁰. Particularly, *the ideas of liberty*, are conceived by them as the source of an unparalleled material and moral progress that transformed humanity over the last few centuries. These *ideas*, conceived as the highest form of value, are a critical element how this elite group is organized and how they deliver their political practices (Graeber 2001), which the actors classified into the *cultural battle* and *politics*. These two complementary fields would diverge by the fact that while the *cultural battle* is a field in which *ideas* can be spread in a purer form, *politics* involves pragmatism.

In this sense, *politics* constitutes a domain considered as lesser to that of ideas (Robbins 2012) in a two-fold way. On the one hand, ideas are seen as defining political disputes over time, so its domain encompasses that of politics. On the other hand, while the domain of ideas is pure, *politics* imply negotiation: thus, there *ideas* are performed in a degenerated manner. Therefore, even though in certain contexts, usually during severe crises, many *liberals* regularly intend to intervene in *politics* to deliver the structural reforms which they consider necessary to ‘overcome the country’s decadence’, *politics* is

110 By ‘ideas’ they refer not only to thoughts or representations, but also to values.

generally referred to as a risk: a domain in which the *ideas*, the highest conceivable value, may become tainted.¹¹¹ In this sense, *liberals* usually seek to intervene in *politics* indirectly, through their support of centre-right forces. In fact, even though the *liberal* parties I observed during the current window of opportunity had *liberal referentes*, their lower ranks were often more clearly identified with republicanist/anti-Peronist stances or right-wing politics. The watchful attitude by *liberals* towards the display of ideas in *politics* is productive as part of the mystification of the elite (Cohen 1981). While in their public interventions *liberals* actively seek to project an intellectual and moral superiority stemming from the highness of the *ideas*, ‘the mud of politics’ exposes them to open conflicts and short-term commitments that may be damaging to their cause.

In contrast to this, the *cultural battle* is conceived as a field in which the *ideas* can be spread in a purer form. While this is always valued, different forms of performance of the ideas are related to substantive hierarchical differences within the liberal movement. On the one hand, individuals that have been trained in the *ideas* at *liberal academic* institutions (think tanks and universities) and perform them through lectures, research and networking are the most recognized actors of the transnational *liberal* elite. Their work in the dissemination of the *ideas* in these higher, purer contexts, complemented by their participation in mainstream media, appeared as critical for their personal progression in the transnational networks of *liberal* institutions. On the other hand, the spreading of *ideas* is not limited to those who are keenly valued for their high performances. Other individuals may be valued to a lesser extent for communicating the *ideas* to larger audiences. This is the case for journalists, artists, communicators, who may sometimes participate at activities organized by *liberal* institutions, and may be trained by them, but are not part of those institutions and the *liberal* elite itself. This contrast between high/low performances of the *ideas* may be seen as correlative of two forms of capital possessed by actors of the liberal movement: academic capital and mediating capital (Bourdieu 1996).

The recent rise of liberalism in Argentina can be related to the appearance of new *liberal* and ‘liberal’ *referentes*. These would be characterized both by their closer connections to other right-wing sectors and by their confrontational style. As *liberals* tend to do in general, these actors claim a position of intellectual and moral superiority over the ‘populist’/‘socialist’ antagonist who they deem totalitarian. However, different from the most prestigious *liberals*, their rise as *referentes* is not based in their deep understanding and performance of the *ideas* (academic capital) as much as it is based on their popularity (mediating capital). While claiming a position of hierarchical symmetry vis-a-vis

¹¹¹ Naturally, while these objectives are processed in terms of group values, the proposed conceptual frame on morality observes it as intrinsically related with interest.

established *liberals*, these actors question the tacit structures of *liberal* political practices: that is, they question the prominence of an elite which cultivates a position of distinction, drawing on their intellectual leadership in relation to their of non-liberal *friends of liberty* of the political and business sectors. The rise of these new actors has led to a context of growth and friction within the liberal movement. While their actions are perceived as critical for the liberal surge, their questioning of the existing hierarchies is problematic for the *liberal* elites.

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Politicians, scholars, communicators; demonstrations, party meetings, conferences, congresses, publications by liberals, Youtube videos; multi-scaled organizations. This work consisted of a journey presenting us with a diverse sort of actors in conflict, and heterogeneous social spaces in which I conducted my fieldwork observations. While ethnographically following the practices and conflicts displayed by the actors of a *liberal* political party, I found myself reconstructing the larger social world in which their actions made sense - and which, therefore, had to be explored.

At times, this journey took me to fieldwork observations at political meetings held in-person, involving tried-and-tested ethnographic data production techniques. On other occasions it lead me to observations of online social spaces, involving digital ethnography methods that form a new field of studies (i.e. Miller and Horst 2012; Pink et al 2016). Yet other times, the centrality of transnational networks of institutions revealed itself as constitutive of the observed field, which meant posed methodological challenges in its own right. As Thomas Hylland Eriksen (2016: 6) argues, 'While ethnography is the richest and most naturalistic of all the social science methods, it is not sufficient when the task at hand amounts to a study of global interconnectedness (...) the methods of ethnography must therefore be supplemented'. Thus, the analysis of existing literature, secondary sources, interviews, and the observations of actual practices by *academics* in online activities was crucial to grasp those critical contexts.

All in all, the thread that connects those diverse observed actors and practices resulted from the dialectic interaction between the researcher and the field. In this sense, it entails an analytical proposal that departs from the actions and conceptions performed by the studied subjects. It is, nonetheless, only a first attempt at grappling with a fertile yet understudied area for anthropological research.

Anthropologists have long constructed their arguments in relation to the universalist claims of the 'Western' liberal tradition, and have produced large amounts of insightful approaches on

'neoliberalism'. Nonetheless, the actual networks of *liberal* institutions and how these actors seek to transform reality according to their own aspirations, have remained, to my knowledge, a blind spot to our discipline. I believe that this field could provide powerful insights for the analysis of the specific forms in which 'neoliberalisms' (Nonini, 2008) come into being in diverse contexts and, thus, for the study of contemporary capitalism.

Other disciplines, such as sociology, history, political science and communication, however, have produced quite a bit on this subject. This excellent literature was enriching for my work, but its focus frequently diverged from that which we would characterize as "anthropological work". They often sought to analyze public interventions by liberal-conservative intellectuals, and the roles assumed by some of these individuals in relation to military governments. However, internal diversity, forms of organization and frictions were usually a secondary concern. For example, works on the second half of the 20th century may mention that liberal-conservative intellectuals called for the development of a 'battle of ideas' against socialism, but how this conception is related to group values, or how it structures the relations among the diverse liberal-related actors, was not approached. It is our discipline's tradition which is most dedicated to understanding the local perspective, to internal nuances within groups, and to how subjects produce, signify and experience the social worlds they create (and which in turn create them). These were some of the issues which this brief thesis intended to address.

Given the space and time limitations, and the Covid19-situation I had to operate under, it would be extremely fruitful if further research was conducted on this topic. Above all, the relationships between *liberal* institutions (think tanks and parties) and corporations or politicians in diverse scales appear to be critical issues for further comprehending the role of these actors as elites that seek to articulate diverse sectors under their intellectual leadership. Also, the reproduction of the *liberals*-elite through training in academic institutions, international scholarships, funding, or internships is another critical topic. Plus, the relations between the reproduction of *liberals* and the issue of kinship is yet to be explored - blood-relations between liberals were regularly observed during fieldwork and may be worth further looking into. The case is similar regarding gender, given the overwhelming male majorities in all the contexts I observed. Moreover, further research on the heterogeneous actors which I classified as 'liberals', and their relations to liberal and other right-wing actors, would be particularly enriching. Regarding Argentina, such a study would probably profit from the analysis of 'liberals' as an online subculture.

Finally, to a certain extent, my interest in this field can be related to the study of right-wing politics, a topic that runs through the whole thesis, but which I chose not to bring to the forefront in my

discussions. The liberal surge in Argentina is partly connected to political displacements taking place in other countries of Latin America, United States and Europe. The latter cases, in which neo-nationalist movements frequently play the critical part, have been thoroughly studied by anthropologists (e.g. Hochschild, 2016; Kalb & Halmai, 2011; Teitelbaum, 2017; Thorleifsson, 2018). Regarding this, I believe that the case analyzed in this work (possibly relatively similar to other Latin American countries) could be useful for others who study right-wing politics, as I tried to challenge some deeply entrenched dichotomies. Beyond oppositions such as educated/non-educated, cosmopolitan openness/nationalistic narrow-mindedness¹¹², the common contrasts made between liberal/illiberal political forces, elites/populist movements may hide more complex interrelations.

Furthermore, actors of the liberal movement appropriate some of these oppositions in an interesting manner, presenting themselves as educated and cosmopolitan vis-a-vis a ‘populist antagonist’ that they think of as representing backwardness and authoritarianism. Simultaneously, these actors may cultivate symbolical and material relations with political processes as those led by Donald Trump, Jair Bolsonaro or the Spanish VOX. While, as observed in chapter 4, these awkward alliances with conservative and even nationalist actors fuel frictions in the liberal movement, they are not a novelty from a historical perspective. *Liberals*, in present and past times, have established multiple relations with radical-right actors without necessarily being identified as such, often excused in the alleged existential threat posed by ‘populism’.

This is also interesting as, unlike other studied cases of right-wing politics, the *liberal* cultural war in Argentina is not chiefly deployed to counter actors conceived as ‘external’ (immigrants, Brussels elites). The ‘populist’ antagonist may sometimes be conceived within a regional scale (i.e. through the influence of Venezuela and the Foro de Sao Paulo), but in general the enemy is represented as being internal: that is, institutions and individuals (politicians, unions and certain businessmen) who profit from corruption and allegedly are allowed to thrive because of an indoctrinated ‘populist’ society, which constitutes a hidden threat to the republic.

Regarding *liberals*, whether the current transformations in the liberal movement imply a short-lived triumph in skirmishes of the *cultural battle* and a setback in their larger struggle to consolidate as dominant elite remains an open question.

112 Already objected by Pasioka (2017).

Appendix

Table 1: Main liberal academic institutions observed during fieldwork

Institution	Founded	Location	Related Transnational Networks
ESEADE	1978	Buenos Aires	Fundación Internacional para la Libertad
Fundación Apolo	2016	Buenos Aires	Atlas Network
Fundación Atlas 1853	1998	Buenos Aires	Atlas Network Naumann Foundation Partner Property Rights Alliance
Fundación Cívico Republicana	1996	Córdoba	Naumann Foundation Partner RELIAL
Fundación Club de la Libertad	2014	Corrientes	Atlas Network Naumann Foundation Partner
Fundación Global	1996	Mar del Plata	Atlas Network Fundación Internacional para la Libertad Naumann Foundation Partner
Fundación Internacional Bases	2004	Rosario	Atlas Network Naumann Foundation Partner Property Rights Alliance RELIAL
Fundación Federalismo y Libertad	2012	Tucumán	Atlas Network Naumann Foundation Partner RELIAL
Fundación LiberAr	2018	Córdoba	
Fundación Libertad	1988	Rosario	Atlas Network Economic Freedom Network Fundación Internacional para la Libertad Naumann Foundation Partner Property Rights Alliance RELIAL
Fundación Libertad y Progreso	2011	Buenos Aires	Atlas Network Naumann Foundation Partner Property Rights Alliance RELIAL
Universidad del CEMA (UCEMA)	1978	Buenos Aires	Naumann Foundation permanent seminar

Other Argentinian members of the Atlas Network are: Universo Ágora; Asociación Argentina de Contribuyentes; Ayn Rand Center – Latin America; Centro para la Apertura y el Desarrollo de América Latina; Fundación para la Responsabilidad Individual; Instituto Actón.

Other partners of the Naumann Foundation in Argentina are: Instituto Amagi para la Libertad; Ser Fiscal; Visión Liberal¹¹³.

¹¹³ These institutions, as others, are not included in the table because concrete activities by them, or their directors, were rarely (or not) observed during fieldwork. This criteria reduces the representation of smaller institutions and, thus, the relatively federal character of the national *liberal* network.

Table 2: Main liberal referentes in politics during the time of my fieldwork

Party	Person	Born	Studies	Related Institutions	Twitter Followers
Libertario -National	Agustín Spacessi	1975	Lic. Business Administration	Fundación LiberAr: founder/director* Businessman	10.300
Mejorar	Darío Lopérfido	1964	No studies.	Former party: UCR INFOBAE: columnist	51.600
Mejorar	José Luis Patiño	1964	Scientific Journalism Master in Economy & Political Science (ESEADE) -ongoing	ESEADE: student* Naumann Foundation (IAL): Alumni* Ser Fiscal: co-founder*	7.300
Mejorar	Yamil Santoro	1987	Lawyer (UBA) MA Public Policies (UTDT) PhD Business Administration (ESEADE) - ongoing	Naumann Foundation (IAL): Alumni* Fundación Apolo: founder* ESEADE: staff/student* Businessman	64.300
Recrear	Ricardo López Murphy	1951	MA in Economics (University of Chicago)	RELIAL: former President* Foundations a) Cívico Republicana; b) Club de la Libertad/ c) Libertad y Progreso/ d) Federalismo y Libertad: a) founder/ b) consultive council/ c) academic council / advisors council * UCEMA: Associate / Professor* National Minister (different areas): 1999-2001	101.500
Uni2	Manuel Adorni	ca. 1980	Economist	ESEADE: staff* Columnist at media outlets (e.g. Infobae)	221.000
Uni2	Miguel Boggiano	1976	MA in Economics (U.niversity of Chicago)	CEO at Carta Financiera (investment company)	183.000
Uni2	Agustín Etchebarne	ca. 1963	Lic. In Economy (UBA) Specialization in Economic Development (ISVE, Italy)	Fundación Libertad y Progreso: founder/director* Fundación Club de la Libertad: consultive council* ESEADE: lecturer* Delphos Investment: founder	168.100
Uni2	Marcos Hilding Ohlsson	1979	Lic. in Economy (UCA) Master in International Economy (JIBS, Sweden)	Naumann Foundation (IAL): Alumni* ESEADE: staff* Fundación Libertad y Progreso: researcher* Rep. at municipal council (2009-2017) -local party	1.100
Uni2	Gustavo Segré	1964	Lic. BA (UNIBAN, Brazil) International Business and Marketing (FIPE, Brazil)	Sao Paulo Arg-Bra Chamber of Commerce: former director Center Group Consultancy: Brazil Country manager	116.600
Uni2	Fausto Spotorno	ca. 1974	MA in Finance (UCEMA)*	UCEMA: professor/alumni* C. de Estudios Económicos O. Ferreres: director**	75.300
Libertario -CABA	José Luis Espert	1961	PhD. In Economy (UCEMA)	UCEMA: lecturer/alumni* Estudio Espert: financial consultancy group	494.900
Libertario -CABA	Javier Milei	1970	Lic. In Economy (UB) Posgraduate in economy (UTDT)	Fundación Libre: academic council** HSBC Argentina: former senior economist	412.800
Libertario -CABA	Luis Rosales	1965	Journalist	Former parties: Partido Demócrata de Mendoza; PRO	30.600

Referentes that coalesced into Republicanos Unidos are shown in darker blue; those part of Avanza Libertad are in lighter blue. Twitter followers updated to 19/5/21.

* Liberal institution.

** Institution significantly linked to liberal networks which I cannot fully determine if its recognized as liberal
Naumann Foundation (IAL): International Academy for Leadership in Gummersbach, Germany.

Table 3: Main communicators on Youtube and Instagram during fieldwork

Name	Main Platform	Subscribers / Followers
Álvaro Zicarelli	Instagram	55.400
Danann	Youtube	1.230.000
De Peroncho	Youtube	66.400
El Presto	Youtube	317.000
Lilia Lemoine	Instagram	99.000
Tipito Enojado	Youtube	192.000
Welcome Peronia	Youtube	48.000
Los Herederos de Alberdi	Youtube	74.900
Los Liberales -Nicolás Morás	Youtube	310.000
Gentilhombre	Youtube	83.500

Communicators on similar shades of blue held events together. In indigo (Los Herederos de Alberdi) held events with communicators of both the other groups. Subscribers/followers updated to 19/5/21.

Vignettes

1.

April 29th. Interview by one of the directors of the liberal think tank Club de la Libertad with Tipito Enojado, 'liberal' Youtuber. The interview was done through an Instagram Live, later uploaded to Club de la Libertad Youtube Channel.

- I found you on social media and was surprised by the quality of your work, your commitment with the ideas (...) I am very pleased to have people like you working on the side of our ideas (...) How did Tipito Enojado get started in the libertarian struggles?

- Well, as a liberal, late. (...) my channel did not start as liberal, but as related to common sense. In fact, my first video was against social Marxism, on femicides. It made no sense (...) why killing certain gender would be worse than killing another? Where does it end? It was a year ago, then we did not have as many genders. (...) I started to become angry, feel that a day may come when the law gives someone so much power that a person may accuse me of anything and I will go to jail. I had to say something. (...)

Little by little I started to watch other videos (...), I started with Ben Shapiro and zigzagged until I stopped listening to Milei as the person that just yelled, and started listening to what he actually yelled about (...) I went deeper and deeper and deeper, accompanied by 58.000 videos. That is why I always say that liberalism is a movement which you can enter without reading, easily, you may enter via Youtube and become a liberal. And a competent one, too. (...)

- You are a liberal due to common sense, that is the point.

- Exactly. That is why my channel is called 'enemy of fanaticism and a fanatic of common sense'.

Later in the conversation, Tipito argues that a liberal would not be able to conduct the necessary reforms without the cultural battle.

- *The middle class would not understand it. It is not that the lower class wouldn't because, I am gonna say something ugly, but I don't give 3 fucks for what they understand or not, because they are the long-term project (...) for them I will need to focus on them acquiring a good education to be able to move forward, to get tools for producing wealth, to transcend their sad and terrible nature, not nature, their reality.*

Regarding his view on liberal politics:

- *As a political movement, we need to find a political discourse to win elections (...) that is not necessarily liberal. (...) we need more mysticism¹¹⁴ (...) maybe it would be a good idea to ally with the right (...) to present a more consolidated front (...) maybe we should go towards discourses more similar to Bolsonaro's (...) What is Bolsonaro's discourse? Against collectivism, great, that is liberal. Later he criticizes, I don't know, gays. That is not liberal, it's not cool. But then he does nothing against gays, he had no real problem in the end, it was only to win the elections. Well, maybe, I am not gonna say that we should go against gays, but maybe we should go for a bit extreme [sic] political discourse that is effective.*

2.

July 3rd. Joint Live streaming by 6 of the most popular 'liberal' communicators.

Tipito says "we are playing a sort of superior educated diplomacy against apes armed with razor blades, apes armed with Uzis, that is the kind of idiots we are. I do not mean to call for violent stuff or anything of that sort, but in my last video I asked people to send me phone numbers. I received the numbers of national senators, representatives (...). I have the number of one of the most powerful leaders in Argentina (...) those people [that sent him the numbers] could have held politicians responsible for the things they do. You [to the audience] should know that you have a lot of power. If you have a butcher shop (...), when a representative comes to buy, do not sell to him. You have a supermarket (...), is it worth it to serve that dick of a person!? Let's start rejecting these people as a society (...), memorize the representatives of your area, those that you know that live in your city. If you come across him in the street, stare him to death; if he wants to go into your shop, do not sell. Does he talk to you, tell him 'get the hell out, I hate you'. Let's start with some social rejection because if not it is absolute impunity."

114 References to traditional liberalism as epic-less were often noted and even raised in interviews with young 'liberals'.

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