The Far Right and Its Uses of the Past: a Pilot Study

Poppy Lown and Lucas Reydó
July 2023

Introduction

The global rise of the right in mainstream political institutions and civil society organisations has raised multiple questions. What catalysed this recent phenomenon? How do we conceptualise this particular iteration of the (far) right in relation to those of the past? How does it vary across space? What does this mean for the future of 'democracy'? Fears around the rise of the right are invariably tied to collective memories and historical narratives of genocide, military dictatorships and authoritarian regimes, violent neoliberal reforms and inequality, and the persecution of progressive ideas and values. But how do those on the right deal with this past? Building on this question, a small team of researchers, supported by the Gino Germani Research Institute (IIGG) and the University of Leeds' Social Science Institute (LSSI), have collaborated on a project to examine how the past features in the self-identity, strategies and visions of the far right today.

The (Re)Turn to the Far-Right in Present-Day Argentina and Britain presents an exploratory, pilot study of UKIP (Great Britain) and La Libertad Avanza (Argentina), two far-right political parties that made a sudden appearance in mainstream politics over the past decade. Through an analysis of these parties' tweets since 2013, we examine the ways in which the past is called upon to challenge mainstream collective memories of what '*really*' happened, to share lessons learned, or to demand the protection of traditions, customs, and heritage that are perceived to be under threat. Recent debates in the field of sociology have highlighted how memory plays a vital role in mobilising individuals around a cause, in legitimising the aims of a particular party, movement, or policy, and undoubtedly in shaping the ways in which we envision our future. How parties reactivate political movements and social struggles of the past is therefore of primary importance to understanding the aims and functions of different far-right movements today.

To address these themes, *The (Re)Turn of the Far Right and Its Uses of the Past* takes an interdisciplinary approach, drawing from the various methodological expertise and perspectives of its international team members. Our conceptual, theoretical and analytical framework was developed over a series of collaborative workshop sessions that took place between January and July, 2023. Comprising the teams are Dr. Anna Grimaldi (University of Leeds), Dr. Francisco García Chicote (University of Buenos Aires), Dr Christos Vrakapoulis

(University of Edinburgh), Dr. Micaela Cuesta (University of Buenos Aires), Poppy Lown (University of Leeds) and Lucas Reydó (University of Buenos Aires). Together, they combine historical, sociological and critical theory approaches and concepts. In this brief overview of the project and its interdisciplinary approach, we describe and evaluate our methods and initial findings.

Selecting Case Studies: The UK Independence Party and La Libertad Avanza

The first phase of the project consisted of deciding on which parties we would select as case studies. For the Argentinian dimension of this comparative project, we settled on La Libertad Avanza (LLA). A novel force in Argentinian politics, La Libertad Avanza was formed in 2021 by libertarian economist Javier Milei. His party has been associated with various obscure ideological labels, including, 'anarcho-capitalists', 'ultra-liberals', and just straight 'liberals', but scholars mostly agree that La Libertad Avanza sits firmly on the far-right of the political spectrum. We chose this party due to their new, 'outsider' status in Argentinian politics, as well as their relative visibility and popularity as a party that holds parliamentary representation in Argentina. For the British case, we initially aimed to focus on Britain First (BF), a far-right fascist party founded by an ex-British National Party (BNP) activist in 2011. A debate on the suitability of these parties for a comparative approach led to our dropping the BF to focus instead on UKIP. The debate raised how, since its inception, BF as a party has been firmly pushed outside of the mainstream, has never had parliamentary representation, and ultimately failed to gain the acceptance of voters. Due to this, we envisaged that BF would embody a discourse wholly different to LLA, as they would not exhibit the same level of self-censorship as more well-established political parties, who may be concerned with maintaining their position in mainstream politics. To reflect our specific interest in political parties, we opted for UKIP. Despite their waning popularity, UKIP still stands in elections, such as the 2021 Scottish Parliament election, and has experienced a height of 3.8 million votes (12.6%) In the 2015 UK General Election, meaning that they are more in line with LLA in terms of their integration into mainstream politics, making them a more suitable point of comparison.

Data Collection: Manifestos and Twitter accounts.

In a second phase of the research, to narrow down the focus of our study, we needed to develop a set of key themes that we could use to filter and analyse our data. We conducted a preliminary analysis of the most recent manifestos of each party, using content-mapping to identify the issues and themes being discussed most frequently, how they are framed, and whether this relates to the past. We analysed UKIP's 2022 manifesto and LLA's 2023

manifesto, distilling both documents down into key themes and words that were important to the party. These key themes would later be used to treat our data.

We then created content maps of UKIP and La Libertad Avanza's online activities to identify the digital platforms they most frequently used to communicate with their members, supporters, and potential future recruits. Through an evaluation of each party's activity across Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and TikTok, we found that Twitter was the most popular for both parties. UKIP's use of Twitter averaged 14 tweets a day, and while La Libertad Avanza posted less than UKIP averaging just four tweets per day, this was still significantly more compared to other platforms. An overview of these posts' content showed that both parties used their Twitter accounts to articulate aims, explain their ideological positions and policy proposals, and situate themselves in relation to other parties and movements, corresponding with the important ways in which the past can be evoked to shape the movement.

Finally, we collected our data using the Twitter Academic API along with the "AcademicTwitteR" package available in the CRAN repository for the programming language R, which was carried out by our data scraper, Lucas Reydó (UBA). It involved, first of all, retrieving all the tweets from UKIP and LLA's official Twitter accounts. In the case of LLA, we also decided to collect Tweets from their main political representatives, Javier Milei and Victoria Villarruel. The justification for including these accounts' tweets, in addition to those from the official account, is based on two principles. Firstly, La Libertad Avanza is a relatively young political party founded in 2019, so the volume of tweets compared to UKIP (1,500 vs 42,000) would have impacted our comparison. Secondly, the figures of Javier Milei and Victoria Villarruel, elected representatives of the LLA space, are particularly representative, especially the former. Therefore, we considered this a methodologically necessary addition to the data for preliminary analysis.

Once the tweets were obtained, they were filtered based on the keywords identified during our analysis of the manifestos. The work was divided between the LSSI and IIGG teams who analysed the UKIP and LLA tweets respectively. In the following section we describe how this process mapped out onto each of the case studies and offer some initial discussion points based on our findings.

Case Study Analysis: Key Protagonists, Milestone Events, and Uses of the Past

Our analysis demonstrated that both parties engage with the past to achieve their political goals. The first, and perhaps most commonly used technique, was the historical reconstruction of a lost golden era. Both UKIP and LLLA frequently allude to the idea of a better past, with the implication that this must be returned to in order to restore their

country's greatness. This aids the party in creating a political vision for the future, constructing an identity, and having a clear cause around which to rally support. This rhetoric also aids both parties in creating a collective memory of the past, which is proposed and shared amongst supporters, allowing them to collectively visualise a political utopia in which this past is returned to. Relatedly, they also construct a political enemy at whom their animus is focused on, blaming them for the desecration of their modern nation and the loss of the past. Secondly, both parties engage in an active reconstruction, or rewriting, of history; they frame past events according to the motivations of their party, and mark current events as historical milestones to further legitimise their political goals, as well as reinforcing their identity as a party. Finally, both parties position themselves as the drivers of this positive change, branding themselves as crusaders against the mainstream narrative and persuading their audience to support them in bringing about real, revolutionary change. These similarities between these two geographically distant far-right parties show that their semiotic devices and strategies are not necessarily impacted by local contexts.

UKIP: Make Britain Great Again!

From analysis of the UKIP 2022 Manifesto, 16 key themes were identified[1]. These were key words or topics of primary importance to their manifesto, and were repeatedly mentioned throughout discussions surrounding policy and political vision. Some of these terms were used positively, such as 'heritage', 'history' and 'privatisation', whereas others had explicitly negative connotations, such as 'political correctness', 'devolution' and 'equality'. One of the most frequently used words was 'sovereignty', which was often invoked to promote protectionist foreign and domestic policies, such as concerns over immigration and the power of European Courts, the EU and the UN. Conversely, 'wokeness' and 'equality', which were used 11 and 21 times respectively, were always employed negatively, referring to institutions such as the House of Lords or the National Health Service (NHS) as 'woke', and opposing commitments to positive discrimination or the existence of 'protected characteristics'. Mapping the manifestos and gathering key themes also provided context, allowing us to interpret the use of the words with nuance.

Anna Grimaldi and Poppy Lown undertook the task of analysing 1551 tweets from UKIP's official twitter account, filtered from an original set of 24,157 tweets from the 26th August 2011 to the 20th March 2023. Through manual coding, we noted key topics as well as uses of the past. UKIP often referred to a *greater* Britain, and the need to preserve or return to it. For example, they repeatedly made the somewhat vague reference to a 'better time' in British history, evocative of the 'Make America Great Again' political slogan used by Donald

---

[1] 16 Key Themes: 'Sovereign(ty)'; 'Woke'; 'Foreign'; 'Diversity'; 'Heritage'; 'Climate Change'; 'Control'; 'Free Market'; 'Marxist'; 'Media'; 'Devolution'; 'Equality'; 'Political Correct(ness)'/'Politically Correct'; 'Private'/'Privatisation'; 'History'; 'Crime'.

Trump in 2016. Tweets by UKIP reinforced an imagined time in which Britain had 'control' and protected their heritage. At times, these references were more explicit, referring to a prosperous Britain, famous for its navy and fisheries, strong relationships with other nations, 'Judeo-Christian' heritage, freedom of speech, and nationalised services like the NHS and the Royal Mail. Other references were more vague, with slogans such as 'taking back control' offering little detail as to which point in history UKIP wishes to return to. UKIP's Twitter account also makes positive references to the idea of a *duty to the past*, an emotional appeal that hinges on ideas of pride versus humiliation; a collective duty and responsibility to 'protect' Britain's history and heritage. Tweets lamented the 'desecration' of British heritage sites, and promoted campaigns for making days such as St George's Day into a national holiday as ways of protecting heritage. Through the concept of a 'greater Britain' that UKIP promises to 'return to' should they rise to power, the party taps into supporters' disillusionment with current political, economic, and sociocultural challenges and urges them to join UKIP in being outraged and driven to recover what has been lost. UKIP's references to the past can be most clearly defined as a strategy for mobilising support and driving symbolic action with urgency.

It was also found that UKIP places a great deal of emphasis on learning from, accepting, and preserving British history as a way of opposing the 'woke culture' that threatens British tradition. As a logical continuation of their construction of a lost golden era, a *greater* Britain, UKIP must also construct a political enemy, a figure through which they can focus their animus and blame for the downfall of Great British society. Throughout the date range analysed, this enemy stays mostly constant. UKIP repeatedly take aim at the media and political establishment, positioning themselves as the moral outsiders standing up to the corrupt elites. A tweet from 2020 read: "BBC's Emily Maitlis is paid £230,000 to feed the British public the elite's political agenda. The media have become enemies of democracy." This quasi-conspiratory construction promotes the sense that ordinary, principled people (presumably UKIP and their supporters) are engaged in a battle against a corrupt and undeservingly powerful establishment. While the 'elite establishment remains a powerful symbolic figure, more recent tweets show that the enemy has diversified over time as the party has become more focused on ideology. Tweets claimed an ongoing 'Marxist takeover' and 'Marxist plot' in the Labour party, engaging a Cold-War era Red Scare rhetoric to disparage their political opponents and position themselves as defenders of democracy and capitalism. This construction of an enemy allows UKIP to comprehensively set out their narrative. In this contect, the construction of a common enemy solidifies UKIP's identity as a heroic force, creating a common cause and exploiting existing fears about the direction of the country.

UKIP also mobilise the past and mark milestone events to situate themselves historically. Around election times, tweets clearly adopt the concept of 'making history'. The 2016 vote to leave the EU, also known as Brexit, was a key event for UKIP. As one of the most outspoken

and influential supporters of leaving the EU at the time, UKIP framed themselves as the drivers of history, referencing the event as an 'historic', 'once in a lifetime' opportunity for regular British people to 'make history'. Smaller events, such as when the first woman won their lottery draw, are similarly framed as 'making history', adding subtle markers of their progressiveness in relation to gender. It is evident from UKIP's twitter account that they are keen not just to return to a better time, but also to place themselves at the forefront of this backwards march, making history along the way. In doing so, UKIP strengthens their position as the 'outsider party' that people should turn to as they become increasingly disillusioned by the mainstream. They offer a hopeful, even revolutionary alternative to the corruption of 'elite' politicians by constructing themselves as the drivers of positive change.

Alongside these more positive visions of the future, UKIP also refers to the past to generate a sense of urgency and propose that history is moving in an unbearable, regressive direction, a process that must urgently be stopped. They propose that history is moving in the wrong direction, constructing a dystopian future through emotive language to calling on its members to act fast. They portray an increasingly degenerate, corrupt Britain, in which children are being harmed and basic human rights are being eroded. In the tweets of more recent years, UKIP have turned their attention to 'grooming gangs', urging their public to 'protect young girls'. They have also made negative references to the past to urge audiences to learn from past mistakes. In response to a decision to update the classic works of Roald Dahl, UKIP called on memories of 'book burning', evocative of Nazi Germany. They also frequently engage Cold War fears of the internal enemy, for example by calling members of the Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies (SAGE) as 'communist', or the Black Lives Matter movement as 'Marxist'. They construct a worldview of a Britain that is at serious risk of falling into a dystopian, authoritarian rule, paradoxically by adopting the rhetoric of authoritarian powers of the 1970s. These inconsistent references to the past become even more complex as the party also engages Left-wing revolutionary rhetoric to build their own utopia. One tweet reconfigured Karl Marx's famous quote, 'the proletariat have nothing to lose but their chains' into 'we have nothing to lose but our EU shackles'. In another example, UKIP quoted Leon Trotsky to argue that the Conservatives should be consigned to the 'dustbin of history'. The past is thus mobilised in two distinct ways. Through alluding to negative images of an authoritarian past, pointing to the worsening conditions of the present, and generating a sense of inevitable historical change, UKIP build a sense of urgency to join the struggle for social and political change.

UKIP's focus inevitably shifted over the time period of the data set. In the 2011-2013 period, most tweets focused on criticising the EU. In the 2013-2014 period, however, UKIP shifted to issues relating to foreign policy, responding to the UK's intervention in Syria, questioning the existence of foreign aid, and generating a general sense of impending doom surrounding the number of migrants entering the country. In the lead-up to 2016, the year of the infamous Brexit vote, most UKIP tweets focused on rallying support. They linked the UK's

membership to the EU as the source of its present-day troubles, such as increasing immigration and the loss of 'sovereignty'. Even as the vote turned out in their favour, the period between 2016 and 2019 focused on critiquing the management of post-Brexit agreements and legislation. The 2019-2023 period has evidently been a time of reshaping and rebranding for UKIP. In the post-Brexit era, UKIP have sought a new direction by targeting constructs such as 'wokeness' and 'political correctness' and commenting on cultural and societal issues such as grooming gangs, transgenderism, and the so-called 'culture war'. Alongside this shift in themes, there has also been a shift in the tone of UKIP tweets: while earlier messages tended to rallying a revolutionary spirit of action (i.e., Brexit as 'making history'), more recent ones have presented a lamentation of a dystopian Britain. These changes in party rhetoric, undoubtedly due to their declining influence in the post-Brexit era, has changed their image and identity as a party. This also marks a shift in UKIP's engagement with the past. While the past was once relied on to generate pride, belonging, and collective action, it has increasingly become a mechanism through which to oppose the present. UKIP has shifted from the 'revolutionary' force behind Brexit to the party of opposition, rather than change. The disintegration of UKIP's political vision for the future correlates with the weakening of the party itself as their popularity has steadily declined since 2016.

LLA: Long Live Freedom, Damn It!

The analysis of the LLA manifesto revealed important elements of the party's ideological foundations. The party frames its political vision in particular by emphasising the tradition of the Austrian School of Economics and its libertarian or anarcho-liberal currents. In this sense, there is a particularly positive emphasis on concepts such as 'market' and 'freedom', as well as negative attitudes towards 'socialism' or 'social justice'. Regarding the latter, Peronism - a political tradition deeply embedded in Argentina since the 1930s - is seen as one of the central markers of Argentina's decline, though not necessarily the first. The need to return the country to its era of 'power' points to a breaking point in the early 20th century. Although intentionally disguised, this perceived decline seems to correspond with the enactment of the Sáenz Peña Law, which established secret, universal, and compulsory voting, thus breaking the hegemony of the ruling elites of the time. The blame for the nation's declining trajectory is thus placed on the role of the State, which, through its intrusion into the private lives of individuals (particularly through what they consider its founding violence: taxes), conspires against 'the effort, work, and aspirations of a middle class envied around the world at that time'. Similarly to the case of UKIP, these ideological principles guided the construction of analytical categories to work with the collected tweets[2].

---

[2] The classifications were: 'future generations and utopia'; 'fatalism', 'personalisation of historical events', 'falsification of the past', 'the Golden Age of Argentina', 'Casta' and 'decadence'.

Francisco García Chicote, Micaela Cuesta, and Lucas Reydó oversaw the analysis of around 1000 tweets from the official Twitter account of La Libertad Avanza (LLA), since its founding in 2019, as well as approximately 3000 tweets from the accounts of key figures Javier Milei and Victoria Villarruel during the same period. These numbers were filtered from an original 82,000 tweets from when each account was opened. Given the relative historical youth of the party, we do not consider the temporal segmentation of the analysis to be particularly relevant. While the ideological and theoretical trajectory of these accounts are similar, we paid close attention to their subtle differences. The accounts of LLA and Milei were ideologically closer than that of Villarruel, aligning with the principles of the Austrian School and focusing on economic discourse. Villarruel, on the other hand, engages more with the cultural disputes of the far right, particularly regarding the conflict she perceives between what she calls the 'gender ideology' and traditional family values, as well as in relation to the last military dictatorship (1976-1983) and the armed organisations of the 1970s in Argentina.

As in their manifesto, almost every tweet referred to the idea of putting Argentina back on its 'truly liberal' path, which was brought to an end with the state intervention of the 1920s. The concept of the 'Casta' (Chaste, always capitalised) carries weight in identifying a historical enemy that persists to this day and must be defeated. The Casta is a concept used to refer to the traditional political class, and to a lesser extent, a sector of the media and business community. However, there seems to be a special emphasis on using the concept in relation to Peronism and its most recent political iteration, Kirchnerism. The political Casta is characterised by historically seeking perpetuity in power and survival through excessive taxes that subjugate the population. The political discourse of these accounts is particularly virulent when referring to the Casta, which is referred to as 'garbage' that 'must be eliminated' in order to achieve the cherished freedom they aspire to. 'The Casta is afraid' is one of the most repeated slogans regarding everything that the traditional political class has to lose in the face of the new movement surrounding LLA. The idea of the Casta is constructed in opposition to LLA party members, who in turn play the role of the underdogs of the political arena, people who have been morally forced to play a part in Argentinian politics, contrary even to their own desires. LLA identifies their members as common citizens that do not participate in the elitist way of life of the Casta, and who do not want to fall into their habits. The party mobilises this identity to build their political power and legitimacy.

The idea of 'Argentina Potencia' (Powerful Argentina) was consistently referenced in the tweets of LLA and Javier Milei, focusing on the fact that the country's GDP was one of the highest in the world at the beginning of the 20th century, deliberately avoiding the fact that most of the population's living standards were dire during that time. This particular vision of the past realises the ideological prospect of the Austrian School of Economics insofar as it focuses less on the distribution of wealth and more on free-market policies and limited

government intervention, aiming to elevate the importance of these indexes in Argentina's development.

LLA's concept of 'socialism' renders it a political signal of economic failure. Sometimes it is used interchangeably with the concept of Casta, assuming that any state intervention is itself a sign of socialism. In the historical reconstruction of national decline, Argentina has been the eternal victim of socialism, with the sole exception of the 1990s during the government of Carlos Saúl Menem. The 1990s hold great symbolic importance within libertarian discourse as the only truly capitalist moment in Argentine history. This is revealed in numerous tweets that praise the Menem government, particularly the management of then-Minister of the Economy, Domingo Cavallo, who implemented the Convertibility policy, which maintained a fixed exchange rate between the Argentine peso and the US dollar for almost ten years, halting the hyperinflationary process of the late 1980s. This policy is repeatedly referenced in order to contrast it with Argentina's current inflation, which has reached a 115% annual rate. The need to implement a policy of economic stabilisation such as the complete dollarization of the economy to prevent inflation is retroactively justified in the inflation stability of the 1990s.

As a final note, Victoria Villarruel's case is noteworthy for her repeated use of the concept of 'terrorism' in her tweets to justify the military dictatorship of the 1970s and the state-sanctioned 'disappearance' of an estimated 12,000 alleged 'subversives'. Villarruel justifies these murders and disappearances to deny the fact that they were victims of state terror and to assert they were not innocent. At the same time, the concepts of terrorism, Casta, and socialism find a certain degree of conceptual coexistence in her definitions. Today's Casta is then yesterday's terrorists, whose goal is to introduce socialism to Argentina. What is interesting about Villarruel's libertarian perspective is that, on the one hand, she accuses socialism of having already succeeded in taking hold of Argentina culturally and economically. Yet when the country's economic indices show positive growth, Villarruel praises the virtues of capitalism as opposed to those of socialism. This historical construction of the enemy implies a powerful minority rule that needs to be stopped with the power of the ideas of freedom.

Yearning for a lost era: UKIP, LLA and the rewinding of history

A notable similarity between UKIP and LLA is their emphasis on returning to a perceived 'better time' in history. UKIP's tweets repeatedly reference a time in which Britain had control, heritage, and prosperity. Similarly, the analysis of LLA's tweets revealed a focus on returning Argentina to its 'truly liberal' past to reclaim political power and economic success. Both parties employ nostalgia and the idea of reclaiming lost glory as a rallying cry for their followers, positioning themselves as agents of historical change.

Differences between the two cases emerge from their specific ideologies and perceived enemies. UKIP emphasises sovereignty, immigration, and opposition to political correctness, positioning themselves against the perceived threats posed by relatively undefined 'others', such as woke culture or the European Union. In contrast, LLA and its affiliated accounts focus on libertarian and anarcho-liberal currents, advocating for market freedom reform and criticising socialism and social justice. The Casta, representing the traditional political class, particularly Peronism and Kirchnerism, is LLA's named enemy, while UKIP's enemies are associated with global governance and progressive ideologies. While there is a relatively similar concept to 'wokeness' in far-right Argentinian discourse ('progresismo'), it is not as widely used in LLA's rhetoric as it is in UKIP's. At the same time, while UKIP does advance a libertarian free-market ideology, they do not do so to the same extent as LLA.

Tweets also revealed differences in UKIP and LLA's framing of historical events. UKIP constructs a narrative of protecting British heritage and history, but it does not identify a specific point in history in which this was 'lost' or began its decline. On the other hand, LLA, on the other hand, points to a specific capitalist moment during the 1990s, under the government of Carlos Menem.

In conclusion, while both sets of tweets highlight the parties' desire to return to a perceived better time, they differ in terms of their specific ideologies, enemies, and historical narratives. UKIP emphasises issues of sovereignty, immigration, and opposition to political correctness, whereas LLA and its affiliated accounts focus on libertarian economics, criticising socialism, and targeting the traditional political class. Ultimately, both parties advance a belief that their nation is on the wrong course, and that they will be the ones to correct it.