## ◆ Chapter 4

# Extreme-Right Counterpublics in Latin America: *Hispanidad*, Hashtags, and TikTokers in the Era of Late Fascism

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My purpose here is to argue that approaching the Latin American extreme right in the era of social media requires us to locate a different archive to document this movement's reach and goals, and to use a heuristic specific to that archive to interpret them. Most particularly, we must take up the extreme right's most potent tool, its disinformation, as it develops in its peculiar genres—social media petitions, TikTok posts, Facebook posts, and other similar sources—in order to track how they form a reactionary counterpublic that attempts to reframe and subvert public discourse.

The subversion of meaning is a principal tool of the extreme right, aimed at delivering cynical information and self-reflexive misinformation to mold and direct the rhetorical engagement of an ultraright counterpublic. This unites sympathetic publics to specific hatreds and regressive historical visions more than in any actual belief in alternative evidentiary or logical claims. Disinformation also most often eschews opposition in favor of subversion: the markers of the discourses used to signal their claims are often more important to establishing that counterpublic than disinformation's factical content. Ultimately, that counterpublic is trained in a discourse that *rejects* the kind of rhetorical engagement historically associated with opposition and instead directs its energies inward, to establishing and maintaining a group solidarity by means of a compelling affective truth, in the form of visions, often regressive in nature, of what *might be* or *was lost* by the dominant public sphere that rejects them and their alternate, insular truth-telling.

To make this case, the majority of the present text will take as its focus a specific archive of TikTokers from three Latin American countries as examples of how communicators interact online, within the counterpublic of reactionary Catholic *hispanidad* and as subversive forces in real life communities.

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TikTok, now under fire as a subsidiary of the Chinese government, communicates in a distinctive media format of short, personalized videos. Nonetheless, these TikTok videos from the counterpublic of *hispanidad* exemplify some of the specific ways social media communicators work to connect across publics. In consequence, tracking how the form works will help us understand how the reactionary imperialist notion of *hispanidad* emerges as a constitutive set of notions that structure the public spheres of reactionaries across the hispanophone world.

To make this case, let me now turn to focus on the *#hispanidad* hashtag and on a TikTok account widely associated with the promotion and use of that hashtag to promote a renewed authoritarian imperialism centering Spain, the Roman Catholic church, and the violent processes of *mestizaje*, primitive accumulation, and what José Rabasa terms "ethnocide" as the purported triumph of the indigenous/Spanish fusion. In his text *Tell Me the Story of How I Conquered You: Elsewheres and Ethnosuicide in the Colonial Mesoamerican World*, Rabasa frames ethnocide as a practice wherein the voice and authentic expression of the indigenous invaded are transformed by the violent, asymmetrical social order of the Spanish Empire into a construction of imperial expectations.[1] There were once modes of resistance to this practice, Rabasa argues, but what is critical to take away for understanding today's version of this ethnocide is how the very nature of Iberian imperialism is grounded in the attempt to rewrite and constantly rewrite the history of invasion, rather than in force itself.

Within the Hispanophone world and its cultural depth, *#hispanidad* posits and underwrites the centering within a counterpublic of a Spanish-centered, Roman Catholic, and reactionary empire as the apogee of hemispheric governance. The new social-media incarnation of an older ideology (*Hispanidad*) started as a fluid, yet often ill-defined discourse threading throughout the historical record of Hispanophone cultural production. While its coordinates have always aligned with Roman Catholic imperialism, with Spain at the lead as the most devout kingdom in Christendom, this current version dates from the Franco regime's post-Spanish Civil War institutionalization of the historical desires for imperialist totality and affective worship of nostalgia. As early as 1943, it has been noted that the concept of *Hispanidad* reveals an atavistic streak impelling a turn of political consciousness toward nostalgia. At that point, reactionary fantasies emerged: "Spain has turned her face toward her own late Middle Ages," writes historian Bailey W. Diffie in 1943, in one of the earliest English-language analyses of the phenomenon, and one still relevant, given the rigidity of *Hispanidad* discourse.[2] (Diffie 1943, 457). *Hispanidad* in this sense reflects the tendency in *Franquismo* to dissemble about military control by subsuming it under the Baroque trappings of an ideology of international integralist Catholicism.

Diffie signals to the reader additional aspects of the ideology and its hashtag: its foundational anti-Semitism, blood elitism in the vernacular of neo-feudal fetishism, and general contempt for the poorer classes subtending Hispanidad. Thus, the only remedy for the destructive forces of democracy and equalitarianism is a hierarchical society. "God has created the people to work . . . the clergy for the ministration of the Faith . . . the nobility to assure virtue and administer justice."[3] This is the succinct formula of *Hispanidad* regarding the arrangement of society. A panoply of anti-Semitic, racist, Red-baiting, and Catholic supremacist reasons girds the complex of arguments for *Hispanidad*, driven most powerfully by the continual grievance affect driving that reactionary turn towards medievalism.

We return to a moment when a statement like "Spain has turned her face toward her own late Middle Ages" references a still Catholic/imperial *hispanidad* as a political maneuver used to reconfigure the Eurocentric destruction that is part of the indigenous experience and the national history. It signals that the pervasive, international order of colonial logics and the violence that has instantiated the current world order of climate crisis capitalism have been deployed to shift the very order of social reproduction into a new racialized moment and what Denise Ferreira da Silva terms the "global idea of race."[4] The origins of *#Hispanidad* in the Falangist movement thus still suffuses the elitist contempt of democratic society today, bringing an unrelenting dedication to a type of fetish for violent sublimation.[5] As Diffie writes:

> Popular education is also regarded as an evil of the modern age, as it would be by men who despise humankind. The attitude of Falange and Hispanidad in this is a part of the general contempt they have for people. No other impression gathered from reading the literature of Falange is so strong as this: They consider the majority of human beings as the scum of the earth. Hobbes' dictum that man's life is "solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short" seems mild after a few hours with the writings of Gimenez Caballero, Ramiro de Maeztu, and the other philosophers of the Falange.[6]

Diffie, writing in the voice of a post-war US faith in the triumph of liberal democracy, sees in the concept of *Hispanidad* ties to the utopianism of the Falange, styling it as an attempt to inoculate against democracy and self-determination in order to bring into being a global Roman Catholic empire with Spanish cultural hegemony, updated with the vicious anti-democratic and anti-communist streak of post-ultramontanist rightwingers. This practice followed

*Hispanidad* into current discourses of *#hispanidad*. Current TikTokers, such as Candelario Levicán (@chilenonovasco), openly identify as Roman Catholic Monarchists, as do Alberto Hispano (@unaprofesorhispanista) and the Instagram account *camisetasdelostercios*, all of whom explicitly display the Imperialist Spanish flag, the Burgundy cross.

To help us understand how this communication functions within counter-public discourses, let me now offer an interlude on the form of the #hashtag itself, perhaps the most powerful tool that TikTok (and Twitter) uses to connect and tether extreme-right communities. More importantly, careful attention to the communicative dynamics within the relation between TikTok and the reactionary ideas that bind its communities together and subvert their connections with outside publics illustrates what must be seen as a part of the significant problem in trying to counteract disinformation or even weak information: the dialectical hunger of communities for expression of and claims for the validity of their distinctive and separate existence in real life in terms other than those coopted by a dominant public sphere that, they feel, has excluded them. The use of particular hashtags is prevalent in the archive of public speech in Peruvian, Chilean, and Spanish right-wing social media, which exemplify how the alternate associative and affective logics of platforms like TikTok function.

After this interlude, I will return to the specific archive associated with the *#hispanidad* hashtag, to show how this counterpublic forms and maintains itself as a counterpublic through vision and affect, rather than utilitarian logics or the "common sense" of the mainstream public sphere.

## Interlude: The Hashtag as a Configurative (Il)Logic for Community Identity

Signs and symbols, gestures, dances, and musical samples are some of the familiar semiotic strategies that communities use to allude to themselves and refer to their concerns. On social media, such acts of auto-representation are now arranged under the organizational logic of the hashtag, where they are deployed in response to popular mood or commercial whims, as can be seen in the dynamics of hashtags going viral and moving. The result is what Andrea Bernhard terms "the popular signature of the present,"[7] a constant tension between signature, sign, and context, in the old Derridean refrain, that configures the social media post as a shared intersection between collective authorship and individual engagement. Users posting under the rubrics of hashtags produce works that are staged as utterances stemming from individuals, yet also as ones that at the same time inaugurate plurality

and togetherness, signified within the continuity of the hashtag marker. Hashtagged utterances blur the positions and relationships among individuals and communities, suggesting just the right amount of intersubjective formation rather than absolute unity, yet without hierarchies that are beyond the control of the subject—who has *chosen* and declared the intended network in which her utterances are to be consumed. The tagger does not have to *perform* an identity in terms the group will recognize, because taggers position themselves in the community network—in an act of agency, they *claim* an identity on the network (even if falsely, protected by the anonymity of the electronic media).

Furthermore, hashtags emerge in the specific time of the *event*, capitalizing on a discursive moment that is ripe for reframing connections, which again prioritizes the individual tagger's (self-declared) salience and relevance. Each hashtagged utterance not only connects across timeframes of reception and transmission, but also inaugurates a new threshold of what counts for information and misinformation—it creates a new constellation of potential meaning (in Walter Benjamin's sense) that requires the hashtag followers to re-mobilize their understandings of their community and their words. What they gain is not only a link into their network but also new *affordances*—new possibilities of action within their network.

Right-wing social media in Latin America and the Iberian peninsula reflect the *affordances* generated by such dialectics of speaker and the potentials of hashtags on social media. This social media environment demonstrates a constitutive relation to political identity and community affiliation, connecting them through specific forms of dissatisfaction or grievance.[8] In some ways, then, such political counterpublics use hashtags to shift the algorithmic possibilities for seeding new communities, inverting dominant selection matrices by allowing individuals to "seed" new groups based principally on affect and attitude rather than politics or logics, a social possibility that Andreas Barnard considers a potentially durable option for contemporary social community formation.

The hashtag is also important as a binding between everyday communication and computer code, and so it has itself gone viral as the most popular signature of the present. Its effectiveness is most evident in the fact that the pound/hash sign (#) has since begun to appear beyond screens and displays. Barnard situates the hashtag as a transgressive sign that deauthorizes the archival gatekeeping of the dominant culture, including formations like academia (based on status and expertise), business (based on capital), and even game attempts by social media companies to deny hashtags force or distribution (their censorship function). As the author writes: "Today, every Twitter feed and Instagram post provides further testimony to the collective indexing or 'keywording' of the world, which can be undertaken by any user of these

social networks as a creative act that is unrestricted by preinstalled standards or hierarchically tiered modes of access."[9] Hashtag keywording thus maps extant and emerging aesthetic and social coordinates of cultural and social capital, facilitated by the expansive possibilities of hashtag dissemination by individuals.

The strength and fortitude of keywording as an act of agency is at least partially a credit to or affordance of the cooperation between platforms, alongside the convenience of its multiplication over ever-mutating networks of connection. The effects of massive distribution alone can serve to affect the *habitus* of public communication: the distribution can amplify the statistical possibilities of miscommunication through reproduction initiated by users. From the machine side, in contrast, algorithms work in the other direction, restricting communication and channeling users/viewers through narrower channels of communication—and in the case of extreme right hashtags, offering hate and misinformation-filled points of passage.

An example of how the hashtag and publics/counterpublics intersect is the *#hispanidad* hashtag term and the content providers who use it as a way to "remix" TikTok posts with a multiplier effect. To create new nodes and intersections among hashtags (and hence communities), separate, individual users "stitch" together five-second samples of videos as a form of response, collaboration, denunciation, or other discursive function that joins them as speakers with others, using a tool known as "stitch," where users can link videos to each other, generally in a responsive or generative manner. The result is a montage effect, where consumers are led, over the hashtag's power of association, into contact with other TikTokers who claim the hashtag—but often in a different constellation of hashtags than any particular user has experienced to this point. Such remixing is different from the kind of connection made through the app's "duets" feature, which requires content providers to engage with full videos to produce a novel collaboration between users—a dialogue between two full-length posts.

TikTok's features of remixing and enhancing user engagement thus provide opportunities that are even more polyvalent than its more familiar collaboration regime over verbal hashtags alone. The greater the number of interactions spurred on by a hashtag, the more the believability of disinformation and the accessibility of misinformation is likely, or seemingly real—and the videos suggest connections both verbally and visually. Nonetheless, it is not only the users who claim agency in posting this way. Instead, the medium itself helps to curate and create new public spheres within the sheltered environment of the app. Most importantly, hashtag keywording helps the stitch remixing function of TikTok to operate as a chain and link creator, where the communication media structure reception and production. As Michael Warner

argues: "in each case, the public, as a people, is thought to include everyone within the field in question. This sense of totality is brought out by speaking of the public, even though to speak of a national public implies that others exist; there must be as many publics as polities, but whenever one is addressed as the public, the others are assumed not to matter."[10] The ecology joining TikTokers through hashtags and pre-structured encounters (the constellations of stitches, the dialogs of duets) centers each user into what seems to be the midst of an independent public sphere—a community of interactions that performs the functions of a classic public sphere, not in real life, but only within the TikTok sphere of communication (or, to extend the metaphor, the Twittersphere).

This definition of how TikTok creates new types of publics signals that, within these communities and public sphere, it is of great concern that analysts also ascertain which fields and functions motivate or require how that form of address structures both the message and the communities themselves. An example can be found in how the hashtags function in the case of the 2022–2023 Peruvian political crisis and in other cases of repressive forces challenging assumptions about autonomous political spheres by making the medium an agent in the self-organization of public spheres. The result is that the subversive communities (counterpublics) proliferating around technologies such as TikTok, Facebook, WhatsApp, X (formerly Twitter), Telegram, and others instantiate public spheres and counterpublics that function parallel to those technologies. But in many ways, they are insulated from everyday discursive presences rather than physical ones.

## The Fraught Ecologies of Counterpublics

These counterpublics on social media platforms find their material base in how their participants "interpret the internet," as Elisabeth Jay Friedman writes.[11] As evinced by the *#hispanidad*, *#cruzborgoña*, and *#imperioespañol* hashtags linked directly and peripherally to conservative grievance politics around the Burgundy Cross, the reality quickly sets in for scholarship on the movement that there is difficulty in interpreting the closed logic of the imperialist counterpublic: it is not a content logic, but rather an autopoiesis that enables individuals to join in affectively rather than just in terms of pre-structured political debates from the dominant public spheres.

TikTok counterpublic formation is a fine example of this process, a global media reality that allows us to track, at least in part, how publics are formed through the silencing logic of how its networks use hashtags as address. The hashtag explicitly constitutes what is understood as a possibility of communication, signaling who are the "others assumed not to matter" and marginalizing them

out of the conversation. This function is not unique to hashtags. As Friedman argues, publics always resonate with the limiting logics of their hegemonic, expressive possibilities. By virtue of the marginalizing conditions structured by such the public spheres, contesting identity groups establish spheres and nodes of mediation and expression where there are none. They learn rules of communication that build walls between the publics to fortify their network of references and their identity discourses. To be sure, feminist, women's, and queer counterpublics already "have integrated the internet to support their goals of inclusion, community building, and strategizing for social change,"[12] and the extant relations of counterpublics to leftist critiques of politics should not be undervalued. However, structurally, it is critical to read that this historical allegiance to considering the public sphere in terms of issues of social justice and radical futures does not overdetermine a counterpublic in the same way as these walled-off hashtag communities self-determine, especially under semiotic-materialist conditions like those realized in hashtag networks.

Ewa Majewska even suggests that the notion of counterpublic be exclusively attributed to groups existing in conflict with the exclusionary, majoritarian public, not just those resisting from within. Following Habermas's theorization of the public sphere, Majewska writes:

> Theories and practices of counterpublics provide much more egalitarian models of political togetherness in resistance than the liberal ideology of the exclusive public sphere. Counterpublics are rooted in the embodied, lived experiences of heterogeneous groups and societies as well as in their production. They are not merely inclusive but hybrid, practicing solidarity rather than support.[13]

In her reading, such counterpublics are practice spaces where hegemonic spaces are submitted to scrutiny from the position of the excluded, oppressed, or minoritarian sphere of public life. In the best of cases, they reveal the limits of how political life under liberal, capitalist democracy cannot abide radical critique. However, in the case of right-wing reactionaries, the counterpublic is raised to that of a pseudo-totality reminiscent of 1980s discourse of moral majority and cultural panic: an exclusionary mechanism insulating an affectively constituted internal group from the potential logics of the outside, communicating in semiotic forms that are almost mutually unintelligible, even as they exist because they are networked in similar ways.

The sense of totality and belonging associated with the extreme-right counterpublics under discussion here forms the affective field of affinities that

allows them to identify as victims of the exclusions justifying the oppression of marginalized classes by the dominant public spheres. Within the unifying networks undergirding the public sphere—ideological hegemonies, communication technology, class struggle, to name but a small part of this dynamic system—inclusive and exclusive pressures within communicative circuits tend to reflect the intersections of algorithm and effort. These pressures combine the force of purposeful engagement of interested parties with that of the automated effort at the consolidation of users' attention within the predictions of user interest.

Yet the dynamics of this kind of far-right counterpublic often function as something other than an evolving discursive community: they merely resuscitate the presence of disinformation by virtue of how reactionary medialogies operate, *repeating* a particular archive of "acceptable" statements affirmed within their counterpublic to (re)claim identities purportedly not represented in the extant public sphere or in its political logics. The autopoiesis of the social media itself that touches the emotional and cognitive features of the hard right thus facilely weaves disinformation and misinformation into the social mix, intensifying the consolidation of the network across hashtags and dog-whistle semiotic figures that form the wall separating this counterpublic into its own community with *different* norms of communication, effectively isolating it from mainstream and conventional political logics and argumentation strategies.

These conclusions are affirmed in recent studies of disinformation and hard-right discourse, where scholarly work has yielded fascinating results about the relationship between medialogies, rhetorical enframing, and the cognitive effects of discourse. David Castillo and William Egginton forcefully suggest that, for instance, "apocalypticism is in part a result of the kind of disinformation overload that plagues our media culture, as it did that of the baroque."[14] Disinformation, they believe, creates conditions where the resonance and urgency of information thread through deceptive delivery methods, adding an overwhelming affective load to that information, especially when it alludes to "world-ending" consequences.

How this happens is site-specific, and thus tracking how these communities function requires attention to local media conditions. Global differences in delivery method apply, as in the case of Latin America, where digitalization and disinformation are driven more by WhatsApp and other technologies or platforms, like TikTok,[15] rather than Twitter or Facebook. Just as significantly, such exclusionary mechanisms are not one-sided. Castillo and Egginton identify a tendency in the hegemony to disallow counterpublics from operating as the dialectically progressive entities that Elisabeth Jay Friedman argues are exemplified by "[f]eminist and queer counterpublics," but instead as synthetic, closed spaces where disinformation and misinformation are constitutive

and normative parts of the reactionary counterpublic, without being determinative. Quite simply: if a counter-public emerges *within* the larger ecology of the public sphere, it is more easily drowned out or suppressed by an avalanche of majoritarian points of view debating them, whereas a walled-off affective counterpublic uses such "attacks" to raise their walls still higher.

Such closed spaces are nonetheless effective in maintaining the identity of the counterpublic. Warner reminds the reader that

> [a] public can also be a second thing: a concrete audience, a crowd witnessing itself in visible space, as with a theatrical public. Such a public also has a sense of totality, bounded by the event or by the shared physical space. A performer onstage knows where her public is, how big it is, where its boundaries are, and what the time of its common existence is. A crowd at a sports event, a concert, or a riot might be a bit blurrier around the edges but still knows itself by knowing where and when it is assembled in common visibility and common action.[16]

Furthermore, as Peruvian scholars Elder Cuevas-Calderón, Eduardo Yalán Dongo, and Lilian Kanashiro argue, hashtags also reflect such boundary-setting forces. The conflict around the politics of TikTok expression, where decolonial, autonomist, and pluralistic possibilities for social media—such as the creation of alternative markets and monetization strategies for indigenous communities—is countered by the pessimism of those imagining the medium as bearer of an occult, almost Lovecraftian tendency to mutate into its political other. As Cuevas-Calderón, Yalán Dongo, and Kanashiro continue:

> La literatura académica distingue dos posiciones sobre la emergencia de esta plataforma. Por un lado, perspectivas como las de Vizcaíno-Verdú y Aguaded (2022) quienes aprecian a TikTok como un lugar de producción de tipos de empoderamiento de grupos marginalizados social y económicamente. Por otro lado, investigaciones como las de Weimann y Masri (2020a y 2020b) quienes detectaron un lado oculto en la plataforma que da paso a contenidos digitales que incitan a la violencia y al discurso de odio. El presente estudio se posiciona desde esta última perspectiva.

> (Academic literature distinguishes two positions emerging from the platform [TikTok]. On the one hand, perspectives such as those shared by Vizcaíno-Verdú and Aguaded [2022], who both appreciate TikTok as a place for the empowerment of economically and socially marginalized groups. On the other hand, research studies such as those conducted by Weimann and Masri [2020a y 2020b)] who detected a dark side to TikTok that gives space to digital content that incites violence and hate speech. The present study is positioned alongside the latter perspective.)[17]

These authors distinguish the messages sent from the media-specific questions of algorithm and distribution of material, recognizing the autopoietic possibilities of a system that is designed to mirror and replicate the discourse, calls, and responses of human subjects. Moreover, they locate in the automaticity of the algorithm and the opportunities driven by the platform's remix capabilities an inherent capacity to distort facts and drive disinformation, fueled by individuals acting as self-identifiers rather than agents of mainstream rationalities.

Hashtags, as discursive assemblages, could be rendered and understood similarly. As both text and metatext, tag and subject matter, pragmatic and metapragmatic speech, hashtag-mediated discursive assemblages like Twitterverse or TikTok ecosystems are neither simply the reflection of pre-existing discourse formations, nor do they create them out of digital aether. Rather, they are nodes in the becoming of distributed discussions—walls in the making between communities—in which their very materiality as performative utterances is deeply implicated.[18] Juan González-Aguilar, Francisco Segado-Boj, and Mykola Makhortykh have identified how these exclusionary counterpublic assemblages form around the resource and attitude of disinformation and how their reactionary core emerges and solidifies in a series of inflated abstractions and grievance terms such as "program and ideology," "enemies of the people," and "the state," to name a few.[19] Returning to Cuevas-Calderón, Yalán Dongo, and Kanashiro: "la nominalización de las categorías responde a los tipos de de sentimientos expresados por grupos de extrema derecha en diferentes regiones . . . tienden a aparecer con expresiones que develan miedo a relegación, insatisfacción, privación y percepción de ser olvidados" (the nominalization of these categories responds to the type of sentiments expressed by extreme right-wing groups in different regions . . . they tend to appear as expressions that uncover fears of relegation, dissatisfaction, privation, and a belief in having been forgotten).[20]

The marginalization matrix of the far-right TikTokers that I am tracing here works this way because the repertoire of its hashtags includes repetitive claims of victimization and allusions to a displaced history to which reactionary Roman Catholic monarchists lay claim and siege. They become through their

distinctive uses of counterpublic mediality a set of identity-enforcing practices with a liberatory function, centered on the whichever concept they espouse (explained or not). Counterpublic theory recognizes the centrality of political protest and acts of marginalization and oppression as constitutive dimensions. Nonetheless, that body of theory also rejects the idea embodied in the claims of far-right—stressing their (il)logic, not necessarily their affective power—by focusing on the recursive repetition of misinformed claims of victimization, without necessarily seeing the discursive force of the hashtags:

> A partir del análisis de videos y comentarios se encontró un lugar reiterativo desde el que se construye el discurso de los grupos conservadores: la víctima. Identificada como un rol al que se le ha ejercido un agravio, su producción de sentido se basa en el "pleno derecho" de de- fenderse. Razón por la cual, su forma de resistencia, denuncia y combate se manifiesta bajo la premisa de la "libertad de expresión," con diferentes estrategias que van desde el sarcasmo, la burla, el insulto y la repetición de opiniones.[21]

> (Through the analysis of [TikTok] videos, and the accompanying comments, the authors found a regular site from which conservative discourses emerge: the victim. Identified as a subject who is the recipient of a grievance, the production of meaning is based on the "absolute right" of self-defense. For this reason, [reactionary] forms of resistance, denunciation, and combat manifest themselves under the premise of "freedom of speech," with differing strategies ranging from sarcasm, mockery, insult, and the repetition of opinions.)

Citing Arendt, Warner asserts the universalist core of the public sphere while recognizing its material limitations: "[t]he public that Arendt values so much is the scene of world-making and self-disclosure. . . . It is a political scene, necessarily local because the self and the shared world disclosed through it emerge through interaction with others."[22] The question thus arises: can there be genuine interaction with a community that weaves reactionary politics through an administered diet of "sarcasm, mockery, insult, and repetition of opinions," as Cuevas-Calderón et al. assume?

We find examples of how this politics of exclusionary differentiation works in the context of contemporary Peru and Chile, which are both currently riven by the brutality of neo-conservative populism and authoritarian violence. In the case of Peru's current ethnocidal Boluarte regime, these exclusions are directed against the aspirational demands of marginalized constituencies who staked their fortunes on democracies, only to see them brutally disenfranchised; or, in the case of Chile, the emerging publics are threatened with destitution of democracy by military intervention.[23] In such exercises of violence, we can see how the role of the putative unity of the public has been weaponized by the right and reactionary media, which have to erase certain messages. Appealing to a shared world, for instance, is antithetical to a form of (centralized and nationalist) politics predicated on the elevation of a Roman Catholic neo-Iberian empire to prominence. The following conclusion can be derived from applying these theoretical and practical analyses to the specific mediality of hashtags: all publics and counterpublics are ideologically fraught and shifting. As Warner writes:

> The unity of the public, however, is also ideological. It depends on the stylization of the reading act as transparent and replicable; it depends on institutionalized forms of power to realize the agency attributed to the public; and it depends on a hierarchy of faculties that allows some activities to count as public or general and others to be merely personal, private, or particular. Some publics, for these reasons, are more likely than others to stand in for *the* public, to frame their address as the universal discussion of the people.[24]

Given the discourse of grievance and revanchism that permeates the publics engaged with *Hispanidad* and reactionary discourse, I argue that understanding counterpublics as a discursive phenomenon with real political consequences requires outsiders to see their concept as coherent reframings of situations and politics in exclusionary, affective terms that enforce a particular vision of *alienation* from the public sphere and aspiration within the bourgeois public sphere: a vision of alienation and anti-modernity, a set of negative affects nourished by disinformation and misinformation. This vision is tethered to the affective expectations of an exaggerated sense of their own aggrieved status.

It is thus critical to see how disinformation and the mediation of internet technologies are dialectically tied to the counterpublic's expectations, making untangling desire, affect, and intentionality—as well as facts—from the structure of counterpublic identification a difficult, almost disheartening proposition for analysts. At the same time, this is the kind of analysis that a

hashtag analysis requires. In a language, each word is understood as same-but-different each time it is uttered. The hashtag networks used by the extreme right make that difference exclusionary.

## Disinformation Under *Hispanidad*

Disinformation, fed into the community-building social media platforms, as just sketched, has become more than one of the most problematic aspects of the public sphere, influencing counter-discourses and political opinions and documents across the region. As I have suggested in reference to hashtag-generated communities, political agents across the hemisphere, and indeed globally, constantly adapt to the transformation of the social media landscape, attempting to nurture the communicative opportunities offered by the software platforms/social media networks, not just as "logic," however defined, but as affectively powerful. Thus, the production of counterpublics has infected the larger public sphere with what mainstream scholarship too often sees simply as disinformation, especially through the kind of recursive, rhizomatic relationship that I have just outlined. Moreover, within the soil of counterpublic discussion, in the accelerated world of [media] platform capitalism, as Castillo and Stewart put it: "[d] isinformation is false or misleading information presented with the intent to deceive or manipulate an audience. Misinformation, while false or inaccurate, can be the result of human error and not an active or deliberate will to mislead."[25] That latter disclaimer—"not an active or deliberate will to mislead"—is the key to how walled-off counterpublics emerge and self-sustain using disinformation to fend off factual, critically well-formed arguments and their concomitant challenges to group identity.

A specific example of what the mainstream public sphere considers disinformation and how it can breed counterpublics that foreclose debate outside its own group is the case of the resurgence of the Spanish Cross of Burgundy in right-wing protests across Peru, Chile, and Bolivia. How the symbol, their iconic cross, is being deployed within an ecology of hashtags by a transnational confederation of Hispanophone fascists in commune with Roman Catholic ultra-right associations connects the movements as a new form of imperialism through affect. The disinformation associated with these hashtags and their reputations creates an emotional call for a confederacy of officially Roman Catholic nations, culturally centered in Spain, that reject modernity and liberal democracy.

I argue now that this confederacy's neo-imperialist project requires a specific mode of disinformation designed as an active rejection of the public sphere of truth (one based on rational discourse and deliberation) in favor of a public sphere of power (in this case, both affective and keyed into memory politics, the

past rather than the present) in the Foucauldian sense. This counterpublic functions at the intersections of what the deliberative public sphere would identify as fascist ideology, theocratic politics, and contemporary capitalist struggle. Yet to understand the power of this project, engaged scholars must directly account for the dialectical movement between hard-right counterpublics against more mainstream public spheres and their increasingly affective rejection of either a neoliberal or left-inflected public sphere. Returning to the Burgundy Cross flag as a space for practice under the aegis of imperialist *Hispanidad*, we should be able to arrive at analysis that allows the reader to navigate the transformations of reactionary discourse in the public sphere.

As Peruvian writer and *cronista* Gabriela Wieler argues, the Burgundy Cross is a symbol of fascist recrudescence and an appeal to a logic of *#hispanidad* imperialism, papering over the processes of enslavement, religious cynicism, and ideological manipulation, while signaling the development of sophisticated forms of racist, and heterosexist discourse that is the trajectory of primitive accumulation. The Burgundy Cross thus functions as what Wieler determines to be "el símbolo máximo del conservadurismo católico, monárquico, y militar. Siglos antes fue la enseña de los virreinatos que ondeó sobre la destrucción del patrimonio prehispánico, el expolio de nuestras riquezas, la santa inquisición y la explotación indígena" (the maximum symbol of militaristic, monarchic, Roman Catholic conservatism. Centuries prior it was the banner of the viceroyalties that waved during the destruction of the pre-Hispanic patrimony, the looting of our wealth, the Holy Inquistion, and the explotation of indigenous people).[26]

This symbol also retains this significance, at least indexically, for those allied with *#hispanidad*'s fascist, conquest-driven sublimation of colonial history. Moreover, the cross itself is the visual icon of both Spanish irredentism and the promise of a Spanish future that will form part of the multi-polar fascist world of elitist, military corporativist control, born out of the softening of misanthropic fascism, which is of course necessary, as *#hispanidad* superficially evokes the cultural wealth of the fusion of Spanish with indigenous and African racial phenotypes. The aforementioned TikTokers, sharing the obligatory hashtags associated with *#hispanidad*, stitch together their arguments into a reiterative chant, with short video reiterations revealing the status of pleading and demand for attention in far-right discourse.

Moreover, *la cruz borgoña* itself is a stitching, formally and communicatively derived from the conventions of heraldry. The rays of the cross visualize the conjunction of the two vectors of renewed imperialism; at the same time, it reminds the reader of the associative and classificatory power of TikTok stitching and hashtagging to bring publics and counterpublics into rhizomatic association, often revealing signal differences and unforeseen similarities between political orientations and communicative attitudes or

shared hashtags, often instrumentalized to spur or spearhead political conflict.

The Peruvian summer of 2021, one case in which the Burgundy Cross figured, saw that nation in the throes of the COVID-19 pandemic, which would leave Peru with the highest COVID death rate per million people, staggering one of the fastest growing economies in the hemisphere. Almost immediately after the election of President Pedro Castillo, hard-right activists appeared in the streets of Lima with the Burgundy Cross flag, announcing their commitment to crush any vestiges of *indigenismo* in their political class.

Right-wing activists flying the Burgundy Cross in Peru used it to signal their allegiance to the *Carta de Madrid* signatories and to the current space of Catholic integralists and neo-conservatives, as evidenced in *La gaceta de la Iberosfera*, the online news organ of *Fundación disenso,* the extreme-right think tank of the Spanish Vox party. As the president of the community of Madrid has argued, *Hispanidad,* as both a concept and a hashtag, represents a bulwark against the incursions of new anti-Catholicisms and the return of communism.[27] Spanish TikToker *Alberto Hispanismo* does not mince words in his posts, arguing viciously for the minoritarian and counterpublic status of the reactionary line. Reactionary Hispanophone TikTok operates thus as more than a genre of public communication (more than advertising), but less than a public sphere (less than a deliberative community). *Alberto Hispanismo*, for instance, regularly engages with his viewers as members of a sympathetic counterpublic, using his franchise to berate and humiliate commenters rather than engage in dialogue—by addressing opponents as ontologically in error rather than in a full conversation.

Part of the reactionary disinformation matrix is thus the duplicity with which the Burgundy Cross operates within a space of #*hispanidad*, of the reconciliation of the tragedy of primitive accumulation and violent genocide with a putatively recuperated tradition of the concept of *Hispanidad*, itself an emergent tradition of historicization seeking to establish a cultural continuity and relationship with Spain as center of a matrix of Latin American linked through a mutually shared tongue. This linguistic usage suggests a point of unity, a sharing of the pride appealing to the rich indigenous and African contributions to Spanish as a global tongue. Or rather, as an imperialist tongue, for what #*hispanidad* promises is the return to prestige of Spanish under conditions of grinding assault by left-wing forces of destruction. Irredentism *avant la-lettre* guides traditional *Hispanidad* and the counterpublic response toward social dislocation. The Burgundy Cross, in its version of the concept, invokes and evokes its dedication to a "formalism of government," taking its cues from the contours of reactionary thought and neo-feudalist ambitions without alluding to practical politics.

The visual or virtual sign of the Burgundy Cross thus serves as a tether and indicator for the reactionary counterpublic to unite under the particular

rhetorical frame of hard conservative apologia for *#hispanidad*, *#cruzborgoña*, and even, rather cynically, a "*Latinidad*" embodied in the form of Peruvian TikToker @unaprofehispanista's redeployment of the hashtag *#antihispanista* to claim centrality for *Hispanidad* and a Roman Catholicism situated with the authority firmly resting in a Spanish imperial center. He adds advocacy for the destruction of liberalism and the global democratic order. As noted earlier, the vectors of reactionary discourse center on the misappropriation of grievance, marginalization, and cultural dislocation to produce a virulent, racist rhetorical justification for eventual violence against any liberally inflected state. Peruvian YouTuber and TikToker @Titorita, for instance, argues for the invalidation of leftist Peru Libre (the party of the now-exiled former president, Pedro Castillo), by simple adherence to left principles and an exaggerated sense of Marxist-Leninism's complex vision of democracy.[28]

As my conclusion, I now will briefly address how anti-reactionary hashtags and TikTok posts function, especially by means of deploying social media and renewed rhetorical attention to shared material conditions and the politics of class struggle. Let it here suffice to say that, in the era of media consolidation and a neoliberal social media sphere working directly against left-wing interests in the region, I have sketched the necessity for scholarship to address how social media is forming counterpublics of resistance and a specific Latin American "medialogy" uniting anti-fascist forces in the region.

## Some Conclusions

What I have offered is a brief analysis of how the radical right uses hashtags to feign the creation of real-existent counterpublics that nonetheless isolate themselves from others. Creating walls around this kind of counterpublic, specific TikTok accounts emerge as part of the platform's generalized media landscape, expressing (in these cases) content in the vernacular of the fascist media constellation of *Hispanidad.* Its thinkers create the conditions for a type of counterpublic inoculated against incursive new information and hungry for disinformation that anchors the particular narrative of fascism, while at the same time maintaining a type of anti-hegemonic discourse aimed at left discourse or the perceived excesses of the liberal democratic state.

David Castillo and William Egginton name the resulting concept of reality that emerges the culture's *medialogy.* Part of that emerging culture's medialogical topography depends on the diffusive and divisive sense of the social media counterpublic. There, the structural affinities between disparate tendencies are often put into direct, unwilling tension by the hashtag and metadata identification possibilities inherent in the always-already extant dissatisfaction

and egoism of its consumers, each subsuming their own identity under a hashtag like *#hispanidad*. Each hashtag that can be recovered as doing double or triple rhizome-related work among publics confirms in another way that a central part of scholars' medialogical work is to create a network focussing on an ecology of hashtags. As Castillo and Egginton ferociously state: "[m]edia become inflationary when the scope of their representation of the world threatens the confines of their culture's prior notions of reality."[29] A hashtag like *#hispanidad* has the potential to open cracks in worldviews or gaps that some will not wish to cross; the radical right uses it to sponsor a reality of threats and fears.

A culture's medialogy is thus a critical measure of the concerns, affects, and values of a particular media culture's ideological positions, marking the intensities of what is of concern and what is to be proscribed. Social media posts under the sign of the *#hispanidad* hashtag illustrate the platform's expressive capacity: its ability to remix disparate ideas across multiple affinity vectors in ways secondary to the affective and reactionary deployment of ideas united under signs of traditional *Hispanidad*'s renewed and inflated Catholic integralist medialogy. Individuals becoming users of the *#hispanidad* hashtags do so individually, and likely without understanding its ties to traditional *Hispanidad.*

Note, too, that TikTok accounts such as @hispanidadglobal use other tools in this medialogy. It satirizes left culture from the position of a self-identified Mestizo Peruvian Roman Catholic, aligned with Ibero-imperialism, as it inaugurates a heuristic of exclusion and denunciation that forms a medialogy—or read another way, the discursive and philosophical limits of neo-Iberian and *Hispanidad* thought:

> Whether we truly see the theater of marvels is irrelevant; what's important is that we act out our belief. For as long as we perform the foundational beliefs of the community, as long as we are willing to embody the community's belief in its own exceptionalism, then we are all safe as spectators of the theater of marvels and participants in the new medialogy. We are legitimate, uncontaminated members of the exceptional community because we show ourselves seeing the truth of that exceptionalism: we, purebred Christians, true Spaniards can "see" while the others are blind![30]

As this quote suggests, there is, as yet, an ideological and organizational immaturity in ultra-right groups and communities of radicalized fascists within Peru, at the level of the hashtag and the TikTok community.

Nonetheless, it is critical for scholars to understand how the use of stitching and other app features that allow for remixing of posts between users allows hard-right activists to manipulate arguments to their disposition, their diffusion, and their organization of affect and power.[31] Under the hashtag *#hispanidad*, a world exists where the discourses of empire and historical revisionism are documented in its fluidity and should be archived: a discourse where negotiating the effects of the Black Legend on the fragile Spanish psyche is far more important than any attempt to bring a principled, ethical, and restorative approach to cultural reflection.[32]

For example: in TikTok and YouTube videos from the six months prior to the writing of this text (in December 2022), there has been a noticeable rise of posts-as-lament under the hashtags of *#leyendanegra* and *#hispanidad*, showing how these terms operate as nodes or buttonholes that chainstitch together the ambitions of a fascist myth of triumphalist synthesis without dialectic—without reasoned opposition. The Burgundy Cross attempts simply to symbolize and mobilize a Hispanophone unity by circulating and focusing a purportedly restorative approach to culture where the savagery of primitive accumulation and the ambitions of Spanish imperialism hide behind a putative unity. There is a savage forgetting that emerges from flag-waving—itself an act of disinformation through the putative resurrection of the symbol for *Hispanidad* as a hashtag.

Lastly, what is critical to understand, especially for disinformation studies, is the capacity of the counterpublic to challenge disinformation on the basis of affective and communitarian implications rather than conventional logic. If, as so many years ago, Klaus Theweleit claimed that "fascists" were doing "precisely what they wanted," just as in the case of the violence of the Spanish Cross, whose symbolic provenance contains the threads of fascism and Catholic integralism, then we can safely argue that we must recognize how elective affinities, affect, and desire often precede the develop of disinformation—this is especially important as counterpublics develop their medialogical practices. As Castillo and Egginton write, with depth and not a small bit of tragic cynicism: "[t]oday's medialogy, the one specific to the second age of inflationary media, disseminates the ineffable, ever receding reality produced by the first age, repackaging it into products, things, experiences."[33]

In no small measure, then, do we see how symbols like the *cruz borgoña* and the TikTok medium are simply epiphenomena of an age of neoliberal erasure of expressive alternatives and the quest for recognition of the *right* counterpublic. To continue with Castillo and Egginton:

> by "turning copies into things" and thus promoting the idea of portable and individualized realities, our current medialogy has produced neoliberalism as its dominant model for interpersonal relations. Today's fundamentals, unlike those of the foundations of the first inflationary age, are infinitely personalizable; but they are not for that reason any less ineffable.[34]

"Copies into things" perhaps could be modified by adding an equal sign rather than considering it exclusively a form of reification, revealing that counterpublic and media models are mutually constituted in today's media landscape by attempts to repackage the maxims and rants of authoritarian fascism into objects of consumption and communication, whether virtually, materially, or otherwise.

Fascist and hard-right users of TikTok, as Ciáran Connor shows, organize their interventions to specifically enhance access to racist and anti-human content featuring aggressive, disinformation-ridden hate documents: "[t]here are signs that TikTok is being used to post coordinated clips featuring hateful and extremist content."[35] More pointedly, Castillo and Egginton write:

> The self-certainty with which any college student today may demand, and be granted, his or her comfortable truth is simply neoliberalism's version of the religious certainties that animate arch-conservative communities from America to the Middle East. We may live in the heart of the industrialized world, but each of us is entitled to our own private fundamentalism.[36]

The authors demure, but they arrive at a tragic truth about the subjective power of the counterpublic: communities are forged in the crucible of the interpellation of publics and counterpublics and air their contestation in a public sphere. However, the process of exchanging "private fundamentalisms" (like those of specialized groups like the Burgundy Cross that are only conditionally public but cued through hashtags) requires the disinformation and mediation matrix that vacillates between the individual target of public address and the counterpublic to be situated beyond it in lieu of a universal claim.

This is, perhaps, one of the saddest ironies of the study and attempts by academics to counter disinformation—that there may never be a precise algorithm measuring the affective engagement with disinformation as an *appetite* of the counterpublic. Rather, if we follow the problem of the tether between medialogy, disinformation, and the capacity for #hashtags and visual signs to reflect shifting communicative priorities, while simultaneously asserting rigid, authoritarian, and imperialist content, it becomes noticeable how the

heuristic of social media as creating specialized counterpublics makes the task of challenging the current strategic and material threat of disinformation an even more difficult one.

We must acknowledge in our work that the threat of the hard right is not exclusively tied to intentional misinformation campaigns, but that its very existence *requires* a community: a counterpublic, fueled by grievance and walled off from the "mainstream" and eager to consume misinformation and disinformation as part of their political vitality and ideological justifications.

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## Notes

1. José Rabasa, *Tell Me the Story of How I Conquered You: Elsewheres and Ethnosuicide in the Colonial Mesoamerican World* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2014).

2. Bailey W. Diffie, "The Ideology of Hispanidad," *The Hispanic American Historical Review* 23, no. 3 (August 1943): 457.

3. Ibid., 469.

4. Denise Ferreira da Silva, *Toward a Global Idea of Race* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007). Silva lays out a detailed account and devastating critique of the historical process behind Eurocentric global racism.

5. Corey Robin's *The Reactionary Mind* is a foundational piece on the fetishizing of violence inherent to conservative thought since Burke.

6. Diffie, "The Ideology of Hispanidad," 464.

7. Andreas Bernard, *Theory of the Hashtag*, trans. Valentine A. Pakis (Cambridge, MA: Polity Press, 2019), 3.

8. See Elder Cuevas-Calderón, Eduardo Yalán Dongo, and Lilian Kanashiro, "Conservatives Groups on TikTok: Social Polarization in Peru," *Prisma Social* 39, no. 4 (2022): 156–82. Cuevas-Calderón, Yalán Dongo, and Kanashiro's quantitative analysis reveals that there are four basic subject matrices for Peruvian reactionary discourse on TikTok specifically: "Findings show that these groups produce discourses that assume protective positions from moral privileges that represent current fears in hypothetical futures (temporary- dystopian), build their communication from the perspective of the forgotten man or the deprivation of privileges (actor-victimizer) and isolate demands from political to an individual (sacralized-spatial) perspective. We have categorized our findings as follows: a) unsatisfaction, b) deprivation, c) relegation and d) oblivion" (157).

9. Bernard, *Theory of the Hashtag*, 2.

10. Michael Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics* (New York: Zone Books, 2014), 65.

11. Elisabeth Jay Friedman, *Interpreting the Internet: Feminist and Queer Counterpublics in Latin America* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2017).

12. Ibid., 16.

13. Ewa Majewska, *Feminist Antifascism: Counterpublics of the Common* (London: Verso, 2021), 29.

14. David R. Castillo and William Egginton, *Medialogies: Reading Reality in the Age of Inflationary Media* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2017), 78.

15. For further discussion on the role of technological mediation in the Hispanophone public sphere, please see Rayen Condeza Dall'Orso, "Investigación De La Comunicación En Iberoamérica: Una Paleta Diversa," *Cuadernos.info*, no. 53 (2022), https://doi.org/10.7764/cdi.53.53863.

16. Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics*, 82.

17. Cuevas-Calderón, Yalán Dongo, and Kanashiro, "Conservatives Groups on TikTok," 158. Translations my own.

18. See Theresa Sauter and Axel Bruns, "#Auspol: The Hashtag as Community, Event, and Material Object for Engaging with Australian Politics," in *Hashtag Publics: The Power and Politics of Discursive Networks*, ed. Nathan Rambukkana (New York: Peter Lang, 2016).

19. Juan Manuel González-Aguilar, Francisco Segado-Boj, and Mykola Makhortykh, "Populist Right Parties on TikTok: Spectacularization, Personalization, and Hate Speech," *Media and Communication* 11, no. 2 (2023), https://doi.org/10.17645/mac.v11i2.6358.

20. Cuevas-Calderón, Yalán Dongo, and Kanashiro, "Conservatives Groups on TikTok," 39.

21. Ibid., 38.

22. Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics*, 59.

23. A recent case in Chile speaks to the re-emergence of a serious golpista threat within Chile as a distinct rhetorical formation: https:/www.infobae.com/america/

america-latina/2022/05/23/un-ex-jefe-de-la-armada-de-chile-fue-denunciado-por-sedicion-tras-sugerir-una-intervencion-militar-ante-la-patria-amenazada/.

24. Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics*, 117.

25. David Castillo and Cynthia Stewart, "Castillo and Stewart: The Emergence of Disinformation as a Major Threat," *Defense Opinion*, September 29, 2022, https://defenseopinion.com/the-emergence-of-disinformation-as-a-major-threat/248/.

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27. Concha Pérez-Curiel, Ricardo Domínguez-García, and Ana Velasco-Molpeceres, "Exploring the Political Debate over the COVID-19 Vaccination on Twitter: Emotions and Polarization in the Spanish Public Sphere," *Social Sciences* 12, no. 2 (2023): 85, https://doi.org/10.3390/socsci12020085.

28. Titorita, "Perú Libre y Su Incumplimiento de La Ley de Organizaciones Políticas," YouTube, 9:48, May 27, 2021, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vR0CF5878lA.

29. Castillo and Egginton, *Medialogies*, 1.

30. Ibid., 33.

31. There is a now an almost unmanageable body of scholarship abroad on the use of social media and other contemporary modes in hard right discourse. For an introduction, one can begin with Mathias Nilges's *Right-Wing Culture in Contemporary Capitalism Regression and Hope in a Time without Future* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2021).

32. For a more developed understanding of the role by which historical crimes of primitive accumulation, ethnocide, and enslavement map the Iberian political consciousness from the earliest days of the conquistador's invasions, please see José Rabasa, "Aesthetics of Colonial Violence: The Massacre of Acoma in Gaspar de Villagrá's 'Historia de la Nueva México,'" *College Literature* 20, no. 3 (Oct. 1993): 96–114.

33. Castillo and Egginton, *Medialogies*, 156.

34. Ibid., 157.

35. Ciáran Connor, “Hatescape: An In-Depth Analysis of Extremism and Hate Speech on Tiktok,” Institute for Strategic Dialogue, October 13, 2022, https://www.isdglobal.org/isd-publications/hatescape-an-in-depth-analysis-of-extremism-and-hate-speech-on-tiktok/.

36. Castillo and Egginton, *Medialogies*, 121.

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