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Spanish essentialism and the far right: An interview with Ana Luengo

ABSTRACT

Professor Ana Luengo is a leading voice in the study of memory, violence and cultural representation in Spain and Latin America. Her latest book, Arqueología del esencialismo español: Leyes, geneologías y herencias *('Archaeology of Spanish Essentialism: Laws, Genealogies and Inheritance') (Editorial Comares, 2023), explores the roots and contemporary implications of Spanish essentialism – a timely topic given the rise of far-right movements in Spain and beyond. With an academic journey that spans from Germany, where she earned her doctorate at the University of Hamburg, to her current role at San Francisco State University, Professor Luengo has contributed significantly to the fields of memory studies, literature, film and media. Her earlier works, including* La encrucijada de la memoria *('The Crossroads of Memory') (2004, 2nd edition 2012) and 'Perpetradores y memoria democrática en España' ('Perpetrators and democratic memory in Spain') (edited with Katherine O. Stafford, 2017), have established her as an authority on how Spain's history, particularly the Civil War and Francoism, continues to shape cultural narratives. In this interview, Luengo discusses the major themes of* Arqueología del esencialismo español *and analyses how the far right in Spain draws from historical narratives and myths of national identity. Her incisive analysis of the ways in which the past is reconstructed, inherited and politicized offers critical insights into the ideological foundations of these movements, as well as the broader implications for Spain's political and cultural future. Professor Luengo was interviewed on 19 July 2024 by Deirdre Kelly, a lecturer in*

KEYWORDS

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Spanish at Technological University Dublin. This interview has been translated from Spanish and edited for length and clarity.

PALABRAS CLAVE

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RESUMEN

La profesora Ana Luengo es una voz destacada en el estudio de la memoria, la violencia y la representación cultural en España y América Latina. Su último libro, Arqueología del esencialismo español: Leyes, genealogías y herencias *(Editorial Comares, 2023), explora las raíces y las implicaciones contemporáneas del esencialismo español, un tema oportuno dado el auge de los movimientos de extrema derecha en España y fuera de ella. Con una trayectoria académica que abarca desde Alemania, donde se doctoró en la Universidad de Hamburgo, hasta su cargo actual en la Universidad Estatal de San Francisco, la profesora Luengo ha contribuido significativamente a los campos de los estudios sobre la memoria, la literatura, el cine y los medios de comunicación. Sus trabajos anteriores, incluyendo* La encrucijada de la memoria *(2004, 2ª edición, 2012) y 'Perpetradores y memoria democrática en España' (editado con Katherine O. Stafford, 2017), la han establecido como una autoridad en cómo la historia de España, en particular la Guerra Civil y el franquismo, sigue dando forma a las narrativas culturales. En esta entrevista, Luengo aborda los principales temas de* Arqueología del esencialismo español *y analiza cómo la extrema derecha en España se nutre de las narrativas históricas y los mitos de la identidad nacional. Su incisivo análisis de las formas en que se reconstruye, hereda y politiza el pasado ofrece una visión crítica de los fundamentos ideológicos de estos movimientos, así como de las implicaciones más amplias para el futuro político y cultural de España. Luengo fue entrevistada el 19 de julio de 2024 por Deirdre Kelly, profesora de español en la Universidad Tecnológica de Dublín. Esta entrevista ha sido traducida del español y editada para mayor extensión y claridad.*

Deirdre Kelly (DK): *Thank you very much for meeting with me today to talk about your recent book,* Arqueología del esencialismo español: Leyes, geneologías y herencias *and the rise of the far right in Spain. Congratulations on your book. I really liked the mix of your personal and biographical perspective with very rigorous academic research, as well as the combination of both popular and academic sources. It is very refreshing to see this personal essay style. Can you explain how you define essentialism in the context of hegemonic Spanish nationalism, and how this nationalism differs from other forms of Spanish nationalism or other nationalisms in general?*

Ana Luengo (AL): The idea of essentialism is to give a community the notion that they have something unique that belongs to them alone and that differentiates them from the rest. That essence justifies the need to continue to exist as a community, preserving those unique characteristics. This is the basis of any nationalism. Spanish nationalism and its essentialism began when Spain became an empire and the Catholic Monarchs conquered the Iberian Peninsula, except for Portugal. To unite the peninsular kingdoms, they had to create the idea of a Spanish essence, which included Catholicism and a supposed cleansing of blood, along with expansion into America and colonialism. To be Spanish implied being Catholic and having

no Muslim or Jewish heritage, which is absurd considering Spain's historical diversity.

To maintain this essentialism, it is necessary to perpetuate the notion that Spaniards are very special, with a direct connection to the monarchy, which was the founder of this idea. For some sectors in Spain, the monarchy is key to national cohesion. By contrast, other nationalisms, such as those of peripheral or colonized communities, have a *raison d'être* based on defence against hegemonic aggression. These nationalisms have other motives and intentions, which can be positive or negative, depending on how they express themselves. Sometimes these movements can also be exclusionary, racist or xenophobic.

DK: *In* Arqueología del esencialismo español, *you draw on Friedrich Nietzsche's* On the Genealogy of Morals *(1887) and Michel Foucault's archaeological method to examine Spanish cultural expressions and national identity. Could you explain how these philosophical frameworks influence your analysis, and how they help reveal the deeper, often invisible, roots of Spanish nationalism?*

AL: Many expressions of Spanish nationalism, which may seem natural or inherent in society, are in fact deeply rooted in historical practices. Ham is a good example, although it doesn't come up in my book. Ham is very popular in Spain, and the obsession with it may seem trivial. However, historically, killing and eating pork became a sign of being Christian, as distinct from being Muslim or Jewish. The attachment to ham, to the slaughter of the pig in Spain, is something institutionalized since the so-called *Reconquista* ('Reconquest'), that is, since the wars between Christian and Muslim kingdoms, to impose a way of being Christian and to make it clear that you were a Christian. If you killed a pig and ate it, you were a Christian, you were neither a Muslim nor a Jew. In the Cathedral of Leon, some incredible frescoes depict monthly Christian endeavours. Interestingly, one month they portray the slaughter of a pig and another month they show the grape harvest. Muslims don't eat pork or drink wine, so it's a way of saying, 'If you do this, you are a good Christian and a good Spaniard'. This example highlights how cultural expressions can evolve into invisible markers of identity.

Reading Nietzsche, I was interested in his focus on how certain values are imposed to benefit a hegemonic class, and not necessarily because they are morally good. Moreover, Nietzsche stresses that indignation and anger, while not positive *per se*, have driven significant changes in history. For example, I always find it strange when people talk about the French Revolution in a nostalgic, romantic way, when in fact it was very violent. Of course, 'liberté, égalité, fraternité' ('liberty, equality, fraternity') is a nice notion, but it wasn't a peaceful revolution. Nietzsche looks at all this from a different perspective, and I found this very useful for understanding the history of Spain. Foucault, on the other hand, teaches us to look beyond the visible, to understand the underlying layers of cultural and political expressions. His archaeological method helped me to analyse how certain ideas have been created and perpetuated in Spanish society.

DK: *In your book, you engage with the concepts of genealogy and inheritance to critique how Spanish national identity has been constructed and perpetuated over time. Could you elaborate on how these concepts inform your analysis, and why they are essential for understanding the roots of Spanish nationalism?*

AL: The two concepts are closely related. The idea of being a good Spaniard, based on the cleansing of blood, highlights the importance of genealogy and inheritance in Spanish national identity. This shameful idea is one of the foundations of Spanish nationalism. Today, with parties such as Vox and certain sectors of the Partido Popular ('Popular Party' [PP]), these notions of purity and exclusivity are perpetuated, evincing a continuity in this exclusionary construction of national identity. The balance is shifting and, obviously, Africa represents a danger to this fictitious idea of clean blood. Genealogy is important because Spain is based on one of its fundamental principles: we have been Christians since the time of the Catholic Monarchs.

Franco said in his film *Raza* (*Race*) (directed by José Luis Sáenz de Heredia, 1942) that with the *Reconquista* we cleansed our blood of Moors and Jews. These struggles against other religions have created a particular idea in Spain. Genealogy is crucial to understanding Spanish surnames and determining whether people come from more noble or common families. It also reveals racism and colourism in Spain, topics which have gained some attention in the public realm in recent years, but when I lived in Spain, they were rarely discussed. Lighter-skinned people are viewed more favourably in society, which shapes perceptions of social superiority. This is tied to ideas of genealogy and the harmful notion of 'improving the race'.

Heritage is multi-faceted. Pierre Bourdieu's concept of capital is interesting: there is economic capital, which is the material inheritance that keeps certain families in the limelight. Then there are intellectual, moral and ideological legacies that also have value in certain social contexts. Genealogy and inheritance are interconnected; perhaps genealogy is less visible, and inheritance is more tangible.

DK: *In your book, you reject the false authority of the third person narrative voice and the misleading objectivity of the passive voice. You refer to your own contradictions, doubts, education, privileged position, politics and geographical, academic and cultural background. How do these aspects influence your perspective and analysis of Spanish essentialism?*

AL: It is difficult to reveal oneself in a book. As a teacher, I teach that there is no such thing as an objective perspective. We all see things according to our circumstances. I take a moral and emotional stance in the book, although it is not based on my personal or family traumas. In Spain, growing up in a republican family that has experienced loss, disappearances and traumas because of the dictatorship is not the same as growing up in a victorious family that has not suffered such things. Of course, during the war, atrocities happened on both sides, but during the dictatorship, the victorious side could take advantage of their privileged position in society. Discovering these things through affiliation and empathy has made me a witness to these realities, albeit from the outside. Once you see something horrible, you can't unsee it. It's like when you go into a room, and you're told that there's a dead rat under the sheet. Even if you don't see the rat, you know that sheet has a dead rat under it and you're going to be obsessed with it all the time.

From a young age, my parents raised me with a romantic idea of the Latin American left. We listened to Victor Jara, Cuban 'Nueva trova',[1] and other Latin American cultural expressions. I don't think my parents really realized what they were listening to. As a child, I soaked all this up like a sponge. I lived in Catalonia, where I perceived differences in the way people talked about the

1. Cuban 'Nueva trova' is a musical movement that emerged in the late 1960s in Cuba and was heavily influenced by the Cuban Revolution and the ideals of socialism and Cuban nationalism. It blended traditional Cuban styles with socially and politically conscious lyrics.

police and even in their physical gestures. I read a lot of literature, like the poets of the Generation of '27, Luis Cernuda, Federico García Lorca, of course, and I started to question things, especially when I realized that my grandfather was in Granada on the fascist side of the Spanish Civil War, around the time García Lorca was killed there.

Living in Germany was a turning point for me. There, the subject of anti-fascism was very present. A lot of my friends there were involved in the anti-fascist movement, and, of course, so was I. Then, I realized how little I knew about recent Spanish history. I began to study it obsessively and then I understood the nuances in my friendships that I hadn't understood before. That's when I saw the dead rat under the sheet. Morally, I was concerned and could not stop seeing these injustices. Human rights violations are an aberration for a democracy.

DK: *In writing the book, the social and political environment in Spain between 2015 and 2022 influenced you a lot.*

AL: Although I live in the United States, I have always followed the Spanish news. I was excited by the emergence of Podemos, which questioned the Partido Socialista Obrero Español-Partido Popular ('Socialist Party-Popular Party' [PSOE-PP]) bipartisanship that allowed the monarchy and impunity to be maintained. However, as a political party, Podemos had contradictions. Then Vox appeared, and I was very concerned about its parallels with Donald Trump. Vox aligned itself with a part of the population, breaking the bipartisanship in a worrying way. Vox feels legitimized to say and do things that are basically anti-democratic. Even though Podemos had features that did not align with the system, it has not been an anti-system party. It has done what is expected of a party in the system, albeit with different opinions. Now there is a party that is anti-system, and a sector of the Partido Popular that also has an anti-system element that encourages people to engage in anti-democratic behaviour. This goes against the necessary coexistence of a State.

DK: *How do you interpret the role of the Spanish monarchy in perpetuating this essentialist narrative of Spanish identity?*

AL: The monarchy is the golden thread that unites the whole history of Spanish essentialism. The idea of Spain arises with the Catholic Monarchs and is taken up again with each monarch. Even in the Franco era, the Law of Succession of 1947 already established Juan Carlos as the successor. The monarchy gives a sense of unity to the idea of Spain because a member of a royal family already has an incredible role and power within the State. The idea of the Republic scares many people. The king is the centre of the Spanish nation for many. In Spain, we are taught that the king is just a symbol, but in reality, he is the head of the army and signs all the laws. The king has much more importance than we think, not only symbolically but also institutionally, and this is worrying. From the Catholic Monarchs to the Bourbons, there is a symbolic and institutional continuity.

DK: *You also mention in your book concepts used by the royals such as 'common good', 'collective effort', 'reconciliation' and 'forgiveness'. Can you explain this further?*

AL: In 1947, Franco decides that Juan Carlos will be his successor to maintain a certain order and fundamental laws. Juan Carlos's legitimacy was established through a law passed during the Franco regime. The idea of a referendum was created, and the majority of people accepted democracy with a king. Then Juan Carlos began to do things he should not have done and his son, Felipe VI, appeared as a modern and clean figure. This re-legitimizes the monarchy for every generation. Juan Carlos was appointed by Franco and has always been surrounded by people who knew and wanted to maintain the Francoist system. To question the monarchy is to question history and destabilize the system in Spain. My students in the United States cannot believe that in Spain you cannot insult the king or threaten him in a rap song without risking jail. The king and his family are shielded to maintain the idea that they are necessary and give continuity to the system.

DK: *In your book, you address the institutionalized impunity surrounding the crimes committed during Franco's dictatorship. What are the main factors that have allowed this impunity to persist, even decades after the Transition to Democracy?*

AL: The idea of national concord is what gives stability to the royal family. Not prosecuting the crimes of the civil war and Francoism allows the king, Franco's successor, to remain in power. The 1977 Amnesty Law is very perverse because it equates freedom for political prisoners with impunity for the political crimes of the dictatorship. This law effectively shields those responsible for human rights violations, such as child abductions, while protecting the monarchy and upholding the unspoken agreement not to revisit these dark chapters of history. Both the PSOE and the PP have failed to address this because it threatens the system from which they benefit. The 1978 Constitution offered democracy, but with a king, a poisoned candy. Memory is not just about recalling the past, but about finding justice and uncovering the truth behind these crimes.

DK: *In both the Law of Historical Memory (2007) and the more recent Democratic Memory Law (2022), Spain has made legislative efforts to address the legacy of Franco's dictatorship and its impact on the nation's collective memory. However, these laws have faced criticism for not fully confronting the darker aspects of Spain's history or delivering justice to the victims of the regime. In your view, what are the most significant contradictions or shortcomings of these two laws, particularly in their approach to reckoning with the past? How do they fall short in addressing the lingering effects of Francoism and providing justice for the crimes committed during the dictatorship?*

AL: Both laws remain in the symbolic concept of memory. The 2007 Law of Historical Memory starts by saying that family memory is protected, which is fine, but it does not address the problem of finding the disappeared or denouncing human rights violations. All the advances in exhuming bodies and seeking justice come from family members in the first place. I think that as long as Spain's historical memory issue is seen as something simply within the family, it is not seen as a problem of the democracy of the whole state. However, it is a problem of human rights violations that affect the whole state, not just some families. The Democratic Memory Law 2022 is very misleading because it places Spain within a broader geopolitical framework, equating Spain's horrors with those of other countries and at the same time, relativizing

the horror of the Spanish genocide. In 1936, there were about 25 million inhabitants in Spain, of which more than half a million died in a war that began with a fascist coup, over half a million went into exile, half a million were political prisoners during the dictatorship and 114,000 are in mass graves. The figures are chilling. It is not just about remembering and mourning at home, but about finding justice for those affected by the events. Memory is malleable, but we need to talk more about crimes and justice. The Historical Memory Law 2007 was a step, but it remained symbolic. The Democratic Memory Law 2022 also focuses on concord and reconciliation, which is a bit perverse. We need to address truth and justice, not just symbolism. The latter law starts with all this formulation, relating it to very general concepts of historical justice and memory and to the memory of Europe, when in reality, Franco's Spain, which was supposedly neutral during the Second World War, was in practice part of the fascist axis. I find it interesting that the Law of Democratic Memory is taking up that Francoist narrative to legitimize current politics. This is a huge contradiction, which doesn't help at all. Now we have a growing ultra-right wing that is clearly neo-fascist. It is very worrying.

DK: *In your book, you explore Spain's complex and contested position during the Second World War, particularly focusing on its supposed neutrality under Franco. A key example you examine is the División Azul ('Blue Division'), the volunteer unit Franco sent to support Nazi Germany on the Eastern Front, despite Spain's official stance of non-involvement in the war. This raises critical questions about the nature of Spain's neutrality and Franco's ambitions during this period.*

AL: There has been a manipulation of history to say that Franco's neutrality saved us from the Second World War. The Blue Division was not a minority; there were about 45,000 soldiers sent to the Eastern Front, in a population of about 20 million. That's a lot of people. Within what was the structure of European fascism, Franco was insignificant. Hitler and Mussolini could easily have trampled him underfoot. They were not interested because for Hitler, the Spanish were an inferior race. So why did Franco not participate in the Second World War? He took part as much as they let him. He would have liked to have participated more and taken more of Europe's cake. If fascism had won, of course he would have wanted to benefit from a fascist victory in Europe.

DK: *You refer to the highly successful television series* El Ministerio del Tiempo (The Ministry of Time) *(2015–20) in your book as an example of Spanish essentialism. Could you explain how this series serves as a 'propaganda apparatus for Spanish nationalism?'*

AL: Mass cultural artefacts, such as this series, are important to see how a society constructs its idea of the past and how it relates to it affectively. The series *El Ministerio del Tiempo* suggests that Spain, since Queen Isabella the Catholic, has access to the whole of human history, and that regardless of the changes in government, Spain has been the guarantor of world stability. This creates the idea of Spain's moral superiority. The series is very attractive and cool but also problematic because it perpetuates the idea that Spain has always lived up to its universal destiny.

DK: *You mention that this series creates an idea of Spain's moral superiority. Could you give us one more example?*

AL: In an episode about the Moors, the idea of protecting them is presented, but there is a terrorist among them who puts everything at risk. This creates fear of refugees, suggesting that although they are generally good people, any one of them could be dangerous. This fear is the breeding ground for xenophobia, racism and anti-Islamism in Spain.

DK: *In your book, you discuss the contrasting ways Spain has handled the influx of Ukrainian and Syrian refugees, highlighting a more favourable treatment towards the Ukrainian population. You also criticize Spain's response to Syrian refugees. Could you elaborate on this?*

AL: In Spain, both under right-wing governments and under the PSOE, few Syrians have been taken in, and suddenly many Ukrainians, which is obviously racist. The differential treatment of Ukrainian refugees exposes an underlying supremacist mindset, where certain lives are deemed more valuable than others. This has to do with a person's skin colour, language and origin. The difference in the response to Syrian and Ukrainian refugees reveals a lot about Spanish national identity. It has to do with the idea of blood cleanliness and of being very Christian and very White. This racism is deeply rooted in Spain's history and is reflected in the way different groups of refugees are treated. Where does this racism come from? I think it has a lot to do with the fear created around the Muslim community, but also with the fear of a kind of contamination of our identity as a community. This is because of the perception that there are too many outsiders who could change our identity. When I look at Spanish football players, some are considered White in Spain, but from an American perspective, they may be viewed as people of colour. In the United States, the police would stop them assuming they were Latino or North African. I find it strange when people say that Ukrainians are more like us Spaniards. Culturally, we have more in common with some Arab peoples than with Northern Europe. Sometimes the narrative that Ukrainians are more like us seems like an excuse for differential treatment, which, to me, is clearly racist.

DK: *Was there a rumour in Spain that Syrians didn't want to come?*

AL: Yes, it was an excuse. They said that Syrians preferred to stay in refugee camps in Greece or Turkey. That narrative was clearly false, spread by some media and social networks.

DK: *In your book, you explore how the erasure of the memory of Spanish exile impacts Spain's approach to contemporary refugee crises. Could you elaborate on how this historical omission shapes the treatment of today's refugees, and what lessons might be drawn from acknowledging Spain's own past?*

AL: The memory of Spanish exile seems limited to certain sectors of society and does not affect the whole of Spain. The exile of Spanish Republicans after the Spanish Civil War was brutal, affecting Spanish science, culture and literature. Many families were broken and yet this is not reflected in the historical narrative. In education, the exiled poets were spoken of as if they had decided to leave voluntarily, without mentioning the reality of fleeing a dictatorship.

DK: *How does this differ from the German approach?*

AL: In Germany, the approach was a state moral issue, not just a family one. In Spain, exile has not been recognized as something that affects the whole state. This has consequences for political decisions and empathy towards refugees.

DK: *What role does memory play in the refugee rights movement?*

AL: In Spain, there are many organizations that remember the importance of exile and call for refugees to be taken in. However, the state does not see this as its own responsibility. In Catalonia, there is a nationalist narrative that separates Catalan exile from the rest of Spain, which is not fair. It is important to recognize that exile and the Civil War affected the entire Spanish state. The Catalan nationalist narrative sometimes presents exile as exclusive to Catalonia, which is not historically accurate. Fascism in Spain had a brutal impact on the whole peninsula and the islands.

DK: *You mention Nietzsche's idea of resentment as a creative force. How do you see its application in contemporary Spanish society?*

AL: Artistic creation with a political and social commitment is always based on resentment towards something that one wants to change. In Spain today, we see this in the tension between dominant narratives – those supported by the state or other hegemonic forces – and the voices pushing against them. What is particularly fascinating is that we're now seeing cultural expressions from people who come from migrant backgrounds, people who didn't inherit the traditional Spanish narrative through generations but are instead bringing their own unique experiences. This is incredibly important for social change, just as we've seen with the LGBTQI+ community, which was long silenced but is now finding its voice. Alana Portero's novel *La mala costumbre* (*Bad Habit*), for example, deals with resentment and love from the perspective of a trans woman.

DK: *Do you think resentment is a driver for change?*

AL: Yes, I think resentment is an important instigator for making change. Latin American musical forms and inclusive language are examples of how new narratives are emerging and generating change in Spain.

DK: *What do you think about the younger generations?*

AL: Despite how it might seem, I tend to be optimistic. I look at younger generations – whether through my teenage children, my university students or my nieces and nephews – and I believe they are miles ahead of us in many ways. They think more progressively, they're more compassionate and, in general, they're better equipped to handle the complexities of the world. Of course, not everyone is like this, but overall, I think they have a better moral compass. A lot of this has to do with culture and what we consume, how we're shaped by the media and ideas we engage with. It's fascinating to see this cultural evolution and how it's pushing society forward, even if it takes time for everyone to catch up.

DK: *Could we talk about the current situation of the extreme right in Spain and the impact of Alvise Pérez and his far-right, anti-establishment party 'Se acabó la fiesta' (SALF – 'The party is over')? Pérez is a politician and social media personality famous with the Spanish alt-right. His party obtained three seats in the European elections this year, largely through support from his 700,000 followers on his social media account, Telegram. His style has been called 'hooligan-like' due to his aggressive and unconventional communication methods, particularly when targeting politicians for alleged corruption and linking immigration to crime. He has also been called a 'cynical conspiracy theorist' who thrives on anger and disinformation (Hedgecoe 2024: n.pag.).*

AL: I think these expressions of discontent have a lot to do with what is happening globally. Trump introduced a more theatrical and even clownish element to politics, which resonated with many people: the clown who dares to say the things that nobody else dares to say. Therefore, when you have people who are resentful or disgruntled, someone comes along who can articulate certain ideas in an anti-establishment way. The name 'The party is over' is interesting. It's what the annoyed neighbour says. This reminds me of when Trump won the American presidency. In Spain, many dismissed him as crazy, yet similar types have emerged globally, as seen with figures like Javier Milei in Argentina.

These figures channel a lot of discontent and negative effects such as racism, xenophobia and machismo. The idea is that, despite humanitarian advances, there are people who feel abandoned. It's like the dethroned child in the house who throws a tantrum because he loses his privileges. I think this reflects very unhappy people who don't understand what is happening politically. When Podemos came to Parliament, some of them didn't wear a tie, and it was called a 'pyjama party'. Now, with 'The party is over', there is a continuity in this language. This refers to the end of pride, diversity and women's rights.

It is worrying because it seems more ideologically transversal than Vox, which is far right. Sometimes we are not good at communicating the importance of social developments, such as LGBTQI+ rights or immigration, as benefits for society as a whole. The left concentrates on that, and there are workers who only want job improvements. So, this can remain a narrow group. There are also people who don't want to listen and feel hatred against LGBTQI+ people, or people of another origin, colour or religion. Sometimes, until it affects you personally, you don't realize that it can affect anyone. Disability, for example, seen from the outside, seems to have nothing to do with you until it affects you directly. It is a pity that we don't realize this until it affects us. From childhood, we should learn compassion, empathy and solidarity. When trying to introduce these values at school, some people protest them because they think they are fine until they are not. Jorge Drexler's song, 'Todo se transforma' ('Everything Changes'), says that at some point you are going to have to change. This is a reflection of our reality.

DK: *How can humanities education counteract the appeal of the far right, and what are the key factors that will determine its trajectory? How should academics respond?*

AL: Phew, that's a big question! There are two intertwined elements: the idea that my privileges are my rights, and meritocracy. Privileges are not rights and are not equal for all. Meritocracy gives the impression that you can achieve what you want with effort, but not everyone has the same conditions. In schools, we reward children and give them the idea that you are what you deserve. This is dangerous. The education system, from pre-school onwards, is focused on giving rewards for results, but effort does not always have the same result for everyone. At university, we are trapped in a bureaucratization that distracts us from our real work. We need to change these structures. In academia, we sometimes promote meritocracy and competitiveness, which is contradictory if we consider ourselves left wing. We need to be more coherent and honest. Writing in mainstream media, reaching out to more people and being good people to those around us are fundamental. Our private and intellectual lives must be coherently linked. When educating, I try to be responsive and listen to students. I give them a different message; I ask them questions to make them think from a different perspective and get out of their comfort zone.

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