

The Battle of Words: Why Do We Talk About “Far Right” and Not “Far Left”? Interview with Edurne Uriarte

Edurne Uriarte

In recent decades, public debate in Spain and Latin America has been marked by a notable asymmetry in the use of political language, particularly in the way academia, the press, and institutions refer to actors on the left and the right. In this interview, Dr. Edurne Uriarte, Professor of Political Science at Universidad Rey Juan Carlos in Madrid and Member of the Spanish Congress of Deputies for the Partido Popular, whom I thank for her time and willingness to participate, analyzes the academic and media bias that has normalized the use of labels such as “ultra” and “strongman leader” exclusively for the right, along with the discursive mechanisms through which the left’s project has been historically associated with progressivism and democracy, even under autocratic and authoritarian regimes. Finally, she reflects on the “Battle of Words” that, in her view, the right must claim and promote in order to contest the left’s discursive and political dominance, offering a holistic perspective on the present and future of ideological debate in the region and the world.

Sergio Angel [S.A.] Edurne, thank you so much for accepting this invitation. I wanted us to focus the interview specifically on some of the works you have published and, based on that, especially on the ideas you have laid out in them. I would like to start by asking you to tell us a bit about what you would consider the defining characteristics of what could be called the far left.

Edurne Uriarte [E.U.] The most interesting thing to me about the concept of the far left is that it is barely used at all. This is actually a central theme of my latest book, “*La batalla de las palabras para una nueva derecha: Quien domina las palabras domina las ideas*”, which was also the central theme that inspired an earlier book several of us co-authored called “*La extrema izquierda en Europa occidental*”. In that book, we started precisely from the observation that academia, broadly speaking with a capital A, is dominated by the left, and that this has produced a striking bias in analysis. In the social sciences, this bias has led, among other things, to academia constantly talking about the far right while barely talking about the far left at all. That was the starting observation in that book, “*La*

extrema izquierda en Europa occidental”. And it is also one of the themes of my latest book.

When you ask me about the far left, my first reflection as a political scientist and analyst is, why isn’t the concept of the far left used, while the concept of the far right is used constantly? And we have plenty of examples in every country, to name a few, Spain and Colombia, since we’re speaking here as a Spaniard and a Colombian. In Spain, academia talks a great deal about the far right, and when it does, it’s referring, for example, to the political party Vox, yet it barely uses the concept of the far left, even though Spain currently has two very important national parties we could call far left, Sumar and Unidas Podemos. These parties emerged from a party that had once been very important, Podemos, which later split into two branches. Other highly relevant nationalist parties in national politics are Bildu and Esquerra Republicana de Catalunya, parties we could also call far left. What does far left mean? It means parties that keep championing communism and its supposed virtues. That is the main trait that earns them the far left label, because these are parties that have never condemned communism and continue to champion it.

S.A. Edurne, as we go country by country, certain traits start to emerge, especially among the politicians most aligned with what you have just described, the championing of communism and its various forms. For example, in Latin America in particular, we see a romanticizing of the Cuban process, and there’s real difficulty in simply naming things for what they are, calling it a dictatorship, for instance, that word gets avoided, and the romanticizing of what happened in Cuba persists. Beyond that, though, do you think there are other traits, such as an interest in state control of the economy, and beyond that, not just a defense of communism but other characteristics and elements that, despite the differences between countries, might form a unified vision of what we could define as the far left?

E.U. I think that when we talk about extremism or extremisms, the far left, there is a first and foremost trait, support for a dictatorial system. That is the central trait that defines an extremist position. The second trait, building on that, is the justification of violent methods used by far-left groups, for example, the justification of violent methods used by far-left terrorist groups. In Spain we have a clear example, the

Editorial Note. This interview was revised and edited for publication by Zharick Maciel Gómez Becerra, Coordinator and Editorial Assistant of the Cuba Program.

terrorist organization ETA, which no longer exists, but in other countries there are far-left terrorist organizations. Colombia is another example, groups that have been clearly justified and supported by political groups with a far-left ideology. That is the second trait, the justification of violence carried out in the name of left-wing ideas, and these are the main traits that link them to extremism.

Beyond that, the far left is characterized by anti-capitalist positions. It depends, there are variations from one party to another, but I think we have to talk about anti-capitalist positions, and also anti-patriotic positions. In other words, let me explain, the far left is characterized by frontal criticism of what it considers nationalist positions, but nationalism tied to a state, because that same far left, however, defends positions of ethnic nationalism. Spain is another example. Positions against the armed forces, which we could also call antimilitarist, as the far left itself puts it, because that same far left defends the use of violence by certain groups. Positions against national armies, positions against defense spending when it comes to national armies. Then positions defending certain conceptions of radical feminism. And then positions of, I would say, identitarian defense, but only of certain identities, because one characteristic of the left in general in recent decades has been a shift from the centrality of social class to the centrality of certain identities.

S.A. I'd like us to go deeper into that idea now, because I find it very interesting. Look, one of the things I've most appreciated about your work has to do with something that was very common in Cuba, the "battle of ideas". I think one of the essential characteristics, and you describe this very well, is that academia, culture and the press lean left. So it's much easier to talk about the far right and the ultra-right than to talk about the far left and the ultra-left. In fact, regularly in elections, Colombia recently went through this, a candidate who wasn't even from politics, who came from outside, an outsider, was quickly labeled ultra-right and far right. But the establishment candidate, who came from the same party as, and was, President Petro's candidate, President Petro himself comes from an insurgent group, which fits perfectly with what you just described, a romanticizing of violence, in that case from the M-19, was never labeled far left, not by the press, not by intellectuals. And along those same lines, no such reference ever appeared in the cultural conversation either. They spoke of "the left-wing candidate" and "the progressive candidate", but on the other side, "the ultra-right candidate" and "the far-right candidate". Please, tell us a bit about what this battle of ideas involves.

E.U. Yes, this is the central theme of my latest book, called *"La batalla de las palabras para una nueva derecha: Quien domina las palabras domina las ideas"*. The central theme is the dominance the left continues to hold over language and

words, for the simple reason that the left continues to dominate the academic world, the publishing world, the media world and the world of political science. Studies have been done in that field, as I cite in my book, on the ideology of political scientists around the world, and there is an overwhelming dominance of left-wing political scientists. Overwhelming. And this produces the bias I mentioned earlier. That bias explains why that majority left-wing world dominates political language and has normalized the use of words like "ultra", but always applied to right-wing politicians and right-wing intellectuals.

"Ultra", in principle, means an extremist with violent tendencies, basically, someone unhinged with very extreme ideas. Who is it being applied to? Right-wing politicians. In my latest book I give several examples, but since that book went to print in February of this year, I obviously couldn't include what happened in Colombia, which is an excellent example. In that book I use other examples, many of them from Spain, but also from other countries, though I have studied and analyzed the Colombian example in a recent newspaper article.

And what happened? In this case, from the perspective of the European press, well, a good part of the European press, of course all the left-wing press, but even press we could call centrist, liberal, what did they do? They called the president-elect, Abelardo de la Espriella, "the ultra", while the losing candidate, Iván Cepeda, was simply called "left-wing" and "progressive", nothing more. That is a perfect example of what the left's dominance over language means. What does the left do? It calls the right-wing candidate, from a right-wing party, "ultra", to delegitimize him, tear apart his image and tell the world he is unacceptable. Meanwhile, the left-wing candidate is simply called "left-wing", nothing more, and "progressive", a concept the left invented to call itself "progressivism" and "progressive", a positive concept. What does it do with right-wing candidates? Delegitimize them by calling them "ultra". This has happened in Colombia, and it has happened with the European press and how it read what was happening in Colombia.

And I wrote in a newspaper article, "But this is unbelievable, when there's a left-wing candidate with sympathies toward violent left-wing groups and sympathies toward a communist dictatorship like Cuba, he isn't called ultra, not even extremist, he's simply called left-wing". The same thing happens in Spain, right-wing politicians are delegitimized by calling them "ultras", while left-wing politicians, even communists, are simply called "left-wing". And this is happening in Spain and across Western Europe.

S.A. Edurne, on that note, Armando Chaguaceda and I recently reviewed all of CLACSO's press releases, the Latin American Council of Social Sciences, which clearly has a

leftward bias, and we managed to demonstrate exactly what you just described, a bias of attacking democratic right-wing presidents while even protecting left-wing authoritarianisms. In other words, there's an institutionalized pattern, not just in academia in terms of universities, but also in professional associations that show a profile aligned with a single idea. And people who, from within academia, try to question this are immediately labeled far right and ultras."

E.U. Yes, this is a widespread phenomenon. It's happening across the Americas, starting with the United States, I say "starting with" because the United States, given its influence and power, still dominates the academic world of the social sciences. And if we look at what's happening at universities in the United States, it's striking, the social sciences in the United States are dominated by the left to an incredible degree. In my latest book I go over quite a bit of data on the United States, precisely because I use many examples involving Trump and how Trump has been treated in the media, at universities, and what has happened between Trump and certain universities, Harvard University, for example.

And what's going on with Harvard? Harvard is considered one of the most prestigious universities in the world, and if you look at the data on the ideology of that university's social science faculty, what do you find? An overwhelming dominance, with percentages between 80 % and 90 % of Democratic Party voters and a minimal presence of Republican Party voters. This gives us a sense of the brutal bias running through a university as prestigious as Harvard. Harvard is a benchmark, but Harvard is dominated by left-leaning academics. This happens at Harvard, it happens at American universities, it happens across Latin America and it happens in Western Europe. Spain is part of the same story, the same thing happens at our universities.

And in Spain, as in the United States, as in Colombia and as across the Americas, we find, as another example of this bias, that there are numerous academic publications about the far right, but no academic publications about the far left. Is it because it doesn't exist? This is truly troubling, because it means that academia is analyzing things with a brutal bias and ignoring the reality of what Spain is, what Western Europe is, in this case Spain, a country where a communist party still exists, where the far left, parties like Podemos and Sumar, and even the Socialist Party itself, a socialist party, do not condemn communist dictatorships and struggle to condemn communism. This is unimaginable from the perspective of the right.

One last example, and I'll close on this point, I also discuss it in my latest book, something very significant happened in the European Parliament, when for the first time the European Parliament passed a resolution condemning all twentieth-

century European totalitarianisms, that is, fascism, Nazism and communism. To which someone might ask, "Wait, there had been no such condemnation until 2019 from the European Parliament?" No, the European Parliament itself said, "We need to put an end to this abnormal state of affairs". Why? What is the history of Europe over the last century? It's the history of a continent that has experienced three types of totalitarianism, yet has clearly condemned only two, fascism and Nazism, while struggling enormously to condemn the other type, communism.

Well, the European Parliament made real progress on this when it passed that resolution in 2019 condemning all totalitarianisms. We brought that resolution to the Spanish Parliament in 2022, and again in 2023. What happened? The Spanish left, all of it, not just the far left but also the socialists, refused to support it, because they said they refused to put communism on the same level as fascism and Nazism. This is a clear example of what's happening in Europe, but exactly the same thing is happening in the Americas. Here we are in 2026, and there's still a left that refuses to condemn the communist totalitarianisms of the past and the present.

That's why I conclude, and I say this often, that comparing the far left and the far right, the far left is broader and stronger than the far right, since right-wing parties that refuse to condemn fascist and Nazi dictatorships are now a small and shrinking minority.

S.A.Edurne, building on this, in your book you argue that this fight over words needs to happen. Which words should be reworked and reinvented, and which ones should the right start to reclaim and re-signify?

E.U. Yes, that's one of the central themes of my books and my writing in recent years, the idea that the right must fight for words and must enter this battle of words, what we now call the culture war but which is really the same ideological battle as always. An ideological and cultural battle over words that the right has been losing for decades, in which it is a clear minority, for the reasons we've already discussed.

What does this mean, and what should be done? The right in general, and I don't distinguish between the different right-wing parties here, must fight for these words. This means, for example, that it must not accept its leaders, whether politicians or intellectuals, being called "ultras". It must not accept that label from the left, it must challenge it firmly. It must not accept the use of the concept "far right" while the concept of "far left" goes unused. It must not accept the left questioning the values of patriotism, must not accept the ridiculing of patriotism, and must not accept the left's appropriation of concepts like "feminism".

The right, broadly speaking, cannot accept the left talking about a coup, for example, over the assault on the Capitol in the United States, calling that a “coup d’état” and “coup-mongering”, while not calling the attempted coup in Catalonia, the one that took place in Spain in 2017, coup-mongering, calling that instead an “undemocratic act”, which it certainly was and must be condemned, and on that we agree, but only as long as similar undemocratic acts are condemned too. For example, in Spain, on several occasions, following victories by the Partido Popular, there have been calls for “Surround Congress” protests by Podemos, the party that used to be called Podemos, from the far left. The left never called that coup-mongering, it called it “democratic participation”. Which is it?

In France, in recent years, there have been numerous street protests that ended in attempted assaults on institutions and town halls, for example. The left has not called that coup-mongering either. If the other thing is coup-mongering, then this is too. That’s the battle of words I’m talking about, either everything is coup-mongering or everything is democratic participation. In this case, obviously, I think we should talk about coup-mongering in every case, but every case, whether carried out by right-wing extremists or by left-wing extremists.

Other concepts that both the intellectual and the political right need to fight for, since we’re talking about a battle of ideas, a battle of words, are words like “revolution”, “reaction” and “change”. The left has also appropriated a concept like “revolution”. It’s a positive concept because it implies change, and it has assigned the right words like “reaction”. Anything the right does, according to the left, is a reaction, while whatever the left does is a revolution. That is a use of language the right can never accept.

In my book I say that sometimes what the right is doing is the revolution. In some cases it’s true that it’s led by someone on the left, but in other cases it’s led by someone on the right. For example, in recent years what we’re seeing both in the Americas and in Europe is a revolution led by the right. There’s a very significant shift happening in European and American politics, a social protest, largely, against a status quo dominated by the left, both in Europe and in the Americas. That is not a reaction. Let’s not accept the concept “reactionary”, which is a negative concept. Why don’t we call it “revolutionary”, which is the positive concept?

S.A. Edurne, do you write about this with the idea of building a new right in mind? Or do you think the right is already mounting this response in the culture war? In other words, what is the current state of these words and this call you’re making?

E.U. Yes, when I use the concept “new right”, I’m not referring to creating another party, I’m referring to a right that takes up this battle, a right that fights for words, for the narrative and for the dominant discourse. A right that isn’t only concerned with governance, efficiency and the economy, but that also engages in the ideological debate and the fight over words. So when I use “new right”, I’m referring to an attitude within the right, not a new party in every country. Sometimes that’s led by a new party, a new candidate, and sometimes it’s led by an established party that has managed to take up that battle. It depends on what’s happening in each country.

What is true is that in what’s happening in Western Europe, in some countries, the classic right-wing parties, Christian-democrat, liberal and conservative, in some cases failed to grasp this shift and were overtaken by new right-wing parties that understood there were new demands from society and growing frustration with the left’s dominance. That isn’t the case in Spain, where the classic party, the Partido Popular, my own political party, a mix of liberals, Christian-democrats and conservatives, has managed to grasp the shift within the right, which is why it remains the leading party in Spain. There’s another right-wing party, Vox, which is the new party, but in Spain’s case the classic party still leads, and I think it continues to do so because it has understood this new ideological battle, this revolution, and I do want to use the word revolution, taking place in Western Europe and taking place in the Americas. In Europe, of course, a distinction has to be made between Western Europe and Eastern Europe, formerly communist Europe, because the processes are different in the former communist countries.

S.A. Edurne, and here’s the thing, when you look at this through culture, the press and academia, what you hear about is the expansion of the ultra-right. You’re framing it here as a revolution of this new right, and that connects to the fact that, from that cultural lens, every right-wing project gets classified as undemocratic, while every left-wing project, regardless of whether it’s actually democratic, is always spoken of, *per se*, as a pro-democratic idea. How do we fight that? I’d like you to speak to that as we start thinking about wrapping up this interview, what would you propose to remove the stigma of the undemocratic right and the prejudice that has historically painted the left as pro-democratic?

E.U. This is a fundamental part of this battle of words. In fact, it’s at the center of my book, exactly what you just described. The book has numerous examples of this pattern and what’s happening. Across the Americas and Europe, every new party and movement, and even the old right-wing parties, are labeled “ultras”, “the ultra-right”, “the ultras”, “the ultra threat” and “the ultra’s threat to democracy”, while every left-

wing party, including communist parties that defend communist dictatorships, is labeled “progressive”.

This is the enormous democratic contradiction we’re living through right now in Europe and the Americas. And I say in the book that we have to be active in fighting this. It’s difficult because we’re a minority, we’re a minority in academia and we’re a minority in the media, in other words, in the very places where words are defined and used. Even though we’re a minority, we have to wage this great battle. To me it’s the central battle. How do we do it? By calling it out every single day. I write a weekly column for a media outlet, *El Debate*, in Spain, and I analyze this issue over and over again. Over and over again. The bias. I constantly call out how the right, all of the right, is being labeled “ultra” in an attempt to stigmatize it, while any left-wing position, even one defending dictatorships, is considered “progressive”.

A small example of bias, and of what I mean when I talk about the need for activism. In my latest column this past Saturday, I analyzed a piece by a very well-known “Financial Times” columnist, Gideon Rachman. The “Financial Times”, a hugely influential international newspaper usually described as liberal, though I disagree, I think it’s social democratic in its positions, in its leading columnists, and it shapes Western thinking, for example, Gideon Rachman, a respected columnist, wrote in one of his latest columns about what he calls, in English of course, “strongman leaders”, meaning leaders with authoritarian, caudillo-style tendencies. What was Gideon Rachman doing? Analyzing the leadership style of what he called “strongman leaders”, and he used Trump as an example, of course, since Trump has been the main obsession of progressivism in recent years, an obsession that borders on a certain madness.

Well, Gideon Rachman offered a very critical analysis of what he considers “strongman leaders”. He said they share several traits, such as accumulating power, surrounding themselves with a small inner circle, and fighting the institutions they dislike and that criticize them. And he used Trump as an example, along with several other right-wing leaders, but he never once thought of a single left-wing leader. And I wrote in that piece, “But the perfect example is Spain’s own prime minister, Pedro Sánchez, he has all of those traits, and yet Gideon Rachman never thought of him”. That’s an example of bias, and it’s an example of what’s happening in journalism. So what do we do about it? Criticize it, question it again and again, which is what I try to do, not only in this book but in every piece I write for the media.

S.A. And speaking of what you just said, the case of Claudia Sheinbaum, who also breaks that framework, because on top of everything she’s a woman, and there’s this assumption that

women can’t be authoritarian, which is itself another biased view rooted in that preconception of the pacifist, pro-democratic woman. And right now in Latin America, the Mexican case is tremendously emblematic.

E.U. Hat’s a good example I didn’t think of in the article, since Gideon Rachman, if he were writing it now, said that “strongman leaders” tend to be, and it’s literally built into the word “strongman”, “man”, of course, tend to be men, populist and nationalist. This is the typical oversimplification of progressive bias, and a common one within progressive bias. I didn’t think of Claudia Sheinbaum either, but as I did write in the article, “But hold on, if there are barely any women presidents to begin with, how can you make this generalization that they tend to be men? There simply aren’t enough women to compare against”. And I hadn’t thought of Claudia Sheinbaum.

But then, nationalist and populist, what does that even mean? “Populist” is another example of the bias, by the way, and it’s also in my latest book, when there’s just as much populism, or more, on the left as on the right, it’s spread across both sides. And nationalist, what do you even mean by that? What does that mean? What is a patriot? And since when is being a patriot a bad thing? Typical progressive bias. Because within what I call progressive bias and left-wing bias, which are the same thing by the way, and this is part of the more absurd side of the bias, there’s a tendency to attribute positive qualities to women and negative ones to men. Very typical of left-wing bias, according to which women leaders are excellent and wonderful and have positive traits, while male leaders are bad and negative. Well, as long as the woman in question isn’t from a right-wing party, that’s also true. There’s always a caveat.

S.A. Edurne, thank you so much. Obviously there’s much more we could talk about, but I think we’ve been able to give a general sense of your academic project and, of course, your political project as well.

E.U. Thank you, Sergio.