

# Affective polarization in a Facebook group, between hateful subjectivities and populist agonisms. Case #Culiacanazo, Mexico

## Polarización afectiva en un grupo de Facebook, entre subjetividades odiantes y agonismos populistas. Caso #Culiacanazo, México

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### ABSTRACT

This article analyzes affective polarization in a Facebook group on public and historical issues. Through a critical discourse analysis of the 10 most engaged posts during a specific period, in which the "#Culiacanazo" (the failed operation to capture a drug trafficker during the Andrés Manuel López Obrador administration) was prominent on social media, it was found that affective content predominated over deliberative content. If for political science, polarization threatens liberal democracies, for post-Marxist perspectives, like populist agonism, they are also forms of political participation. This, in the context of Latin American countries, whose social complexity requires an understanding beyond liberal democrat rationality.

### KEYWORDS

Affective polarization, post-Marxism, populist agonism, critical discourse analysis, digital social networks

### RESUMEN

Este artículo analiza la polarización afectiva en un grupo de Facebook sobre temas públicos e históricos. Mediante un análisis crítico del discurso de las 10 publicaciones

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con más peso en un periodo específico, en el que destacó en redes el «#Culiacanazo» (fallido operativo para capturar un narcotraficante durante el Gobierno de Andrés Manuel López Obrador, AMLO), se encontró que predominaron los contenidos afectivos sobre los deliberativos. Si para la ciencia política la polarización amenaza a las democracias liberales, para perspectivas posmarxistas, como el agonismo populista, son también formas de participación política, en el contexto de países latinoamericanos cuya complejidad social requiere ser entendida más allá de la racionalidad democrática liberal.

#### **PALABRAS CLAVE**

Polarización afectiva, posmarxismo, agonismo populista, análisis crítico del discurso, redes sociales digitales

### **Introduction**

This research focuses on the interactions of certain Mexican users of the digital social network Facebook, within a group dedicated to historical and political topics, in the context of the administration of Andrés Manuel López Obrador in Mexico, a former center-left president characterized by his controversial discourse during his six-year term, which was widely regarded as polarizing.

The central questions are: In what ways did the dynamics of social and affective polarization unfold among the users of a Facebook group devoted to public and historical debates during the administration of former president Andrés Manuel López Obrador? If such a phenomenon of polarization existed, was it incited by politicians and subsequently taken up by citizens, or is it an inherent consequence of the historical dialectics of a Global South nation such as Mexico?

The structure of this research first develops a theoretical approach to conflict and social polarization from two main perspectives: the liberal democratic framework, derived from the empiricism of political science, and the perspective of historical materialism, along with subsequent proposals that seek to overcome the class essentialism that characterizes it.

Subsequently, I examine the possible correlation between geopolitical and affective polarization within a world-system, where the separation between center and periphery is reinforced by symbolic resources that shape hateful subjectivities—forms of thought that legitimize an individualism dismissive of any reality alternative to an entrepreneurial and privatizing worldview (Leonard, 2020).

I then continue with the historical struggle for political power in Latin America, with particular emphasis on Mexico, and subsequently address the era of polarization on the internet. In the methodological section, I explain why I consider relevant the proposal of Van Dijk's (2000) critical discourse analysis to examine the study universe: a group of Facebook users who confront one another around public issues and deploy rhetorical resources as means of establishing social positions vis-à-vis the world, to the detriment of those who think differently. This occurs within multimedia systems where narratives emanating from structures of political and economic power circulate (Pardo, 2016). It is worth noting that I also conducted fieldwork within the context of the #Culiacanazo: a failed Mexican government operation to capture a drug trafficker in 2019.

### **Social Polarization and Conflict**

Durkheim (2007 [1893], pp. 479-480) considered conflict to be, to some extent, beneficial for social cohesion. However, he viewed extreme conflict as a pathology «of the moral and social order.» He attributed class differences to «external inequalities,» inherent to a preexisting mode of organization. In this way, the French sociologist encountered difficulties in linking social inequality to the dynamics of capitalist accumulation.

It was not until the mid-twentieth century that a theory of social polarization was developed, within the context of phenomena such as growing economic inequality in Latin America. Political studies and classical economics attributed polarization to societies divided into a few groups, distant from one another, with a high probability of conflict (Cárdenas, 2011, p. 260). Polarization is conceived as a relative distance between two opposing political viewpoints. It's considered to be driven more by emotions and beliefs than by reason and evidence (Luengo et al., 2021, p. 11).

This perspective draws on cognitive psychology to regard social identity (ethnic, religious, regional, or group-based) as a key concept of human nature. Individuals develop affinities with primary groups and engage in polemics with exogenous ones (Mason, 2015; Neuman, 2016; Abramowitz, 2022).

Lelkes (2016, p. 402) defines affective polarization as a form of prejudice in which individuals intensify feelings of antipathy; he considers it to stem from higher levels of bias and partisan identification. Iyengar et al. (2019) argue that it occurs when antagonism becomes more emotional than ideological. Nevertheless, ideological disagreement exerts a strong influence on feelings toward political parties and their leaders, within a binary spectrum (50-50) of liberal and conservative positions, with rhetoric

among ideological factions whose primary objective is to attack the opponent (Neuman, 2016, pp. 183-208).

Sartori (2003) viewed ideological distance as the principal variable in polarized pluralist party systems. These are characterized by highly exclusionary bilateral oppositions. Although he argued that polarized pluralism cannot be explained through a bilateral model but rather at least a triangular one—left, center, right—he considered centrist parties to play a passive or mediating role. The Italian political scientist regarded anti-system parties as a negative factor that fuels polarization, linked to communities with maximum ideological distance, composed not of rational mentalities but of «empirical» or «pragmatic» ones.

In summary, the liberal democratic and cognitivist approach attributes social polarization to a limited repertoire of individual cognitive schemas and social equilibrium. Ideology is considered a harmful factor, exclusive to radical identities, rather than a vision shared by any social group.

Historical materialism, in contrast, offers an understanding of conflict through the lens of historical dialectics. Marx ([1848] 1998, p. 11) argued that class antagonism intensifies in the bourgeois stage, as society becomes increasingly divided into two opposing camps: the bourgeoisie and the proletariat (Marx and Engels, 1998).

Gramsci ([1948] 1981, pp. 1028-1139) presented ideology as inseparable from any collective practice, unlike Marx, who considered it deforming. The Italian theorist argued that ideology is extensive and includes the proletariat and diverse human groups. He explained that when traditional institutions fail to resolve the population's problems (organic crisis), changes occur in collective consciousness regarding inequality.

Laclau (2005) sought to overcome Marx's class essentialism. He expanded the framework of actors in conflict with the dominant classes. He envisioned social conflict as a populist antagonism between elites and diverse social sectors mobilized around empty signifiers—discursive terms such as «the people,» which acquire meaning when articulated with popular demands.

Mouffe (2000, pp. 126-127), for her part, developed the notion of agonistic pluralism: modes of democratic sociability that are acts of citizenship always in dispute, where contestatory actions are included. Social institutions provide channels through which collective passions may be expressed. This enables modes of identification «where the opponent is not regarded as an enemy but as an adversary.» Laclau (2005) and Mouffe (2000) distanced themselves from the negative hegemonic connotation

of the term populism, considering it instead a discursive strategy through which «the people» are constructed against an elite.

Struggles within a social field occur between hegemonic and counter-hegemonic discourses (Melucci, 1996; Mouffe, 2000, 2009). Conflict fragments into a range of ideological and political positions between both poles. The collective reality of public life requires the existence of factional discourse, which, in the case of political identities, involves the creation of a «We» that exists only through its demarcation against a «They» (Mouffe, 2009, p. 550), and entails collective sentiments (Melucci, 1996, pp. 80-83).

Critiques of Marxist studies point to the binarism that oversimplifies the field of social representation (Barros, 2018; Trucco, 2021), necessitating exploration of the relationship among plural differences (Barros, 2018, p. 37). However, the pluralist approach has been criticized for detaching postmodern social movements from any rational pretension (Dorantes et al., 2019, p. 17).

Despite their differences, the empiricist approach and historical materialism converge on several points: both conceive conflict as a confrontation between two antagonistic poles. Ideology is a factor that deepens distance but also constructs collective and alternative identities. This principal confrontation is transversally intersected by a range of heterogeneous movements that emerged in late capitalism, underrepresented by traditional leftist forces, yet also in conflict with dominant groups.

### **Neoliberalism, Polarization, and Conflict**

To understand affective polarization, it is necessary to grasp the correlation between social structures and the subjectivities of their members. The accumulation model of the Industrial Revolution (18th century) established the international division of labor between national systems centralized by industrial development and the peripheries, which retained a rural role (Asia, Africa, and Latin America). The dominant ideology equated industrialization with «progress» (Amin, 1994, p. 119).

The postwar period (1945-1990) was characterized by the industrialization of the peripheries to gradually integrate them into a globalized world system that extracted wealth from their territories. The role of the welfare state was curtailed to provide maneuvering space for transnational corporations tasked with operating strategic sectors in both center and periphery.

According to Habermas (1980, p. 242), the critical publicity that consolidated modernity was curtailed under a culture integrated into consumption. Public life was co-opted by «neo-mercantilism,» and industrial

culture thematized not only the field of human relations but also the psyche, as subjectivities of «non-public life.»

Leonard (2021, p. 140) argues that neoliberal contemporaneity results in the production of entrepreneurial-competitive subjectivities. This regime of affects gives rise to hateful subjectivities: through the hatred directed at certain signifying figures of the non-entrepreneurial, social order is sustained. While indignation-driven social hatred is blocked, entrepreneurial, competitive, and individualist hatreds are collectivized, generating new forms of sociability and political representation.

Since the 2008 crisis, there has been a gradual legitimization of government projects and party forces with various forms of conservatism, authoritarianism, and neoliberal entrepreneurship, nourished by novel forms of xenophobia, racism, classism, misogyny, and homophobia, under the concept of the «new right» (Leonard, 2021, p. 140). In Latin America, following an initial cycle of progressive hegemony at the beginning of the 21st century, processes of radical political and ideological change emerged, as in Argentina in 2015 and 2023.

## **Social Polarization in Mexico and Latin America**

Latin American history is characterized by dualism and polarization (Saldaña, 2008, p. 104). The republican democratic model adopted by newly independent colonies did not incorporate the majority of Indigenous peoples and impoverished masses. The Mexican Revolution reduced social polarization, while elsewhere intermittent social movements were truncated by military dictatorships. The 19th-century federalist-centralist dualism became, in the 20th century, one of inclusion versus exclusion; the excluded aligned with the left, while business elites, Catholic groups, landowners, and related actors tended to cluster on the right wing.

The economic crises of the 1970s led to a return to liberalizing models with limited social reach, reconcentrating wealth and increasing rural poverty and urban proletarianization. After the failure of neoliberal governments in the 1990s and the maturation of institutional leftist forces, alternation with parties not aligned with dictatorships became possible. However, in Mexico, the right continued to dominate, striking pacts with the old political regime of the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI), which had ruled for 70 years (Saldaña, 2008, p. 106).

The repressive acts of 1968 and 1971, in Tlatelolco and San Cosme, along with the economic crises of the 1980s, fueled social polarization and strengthened the Mexican left, which created the Party of the Democratic Revolution (PRD) in 1986 (Saldaña, 2008, p. 106). In 2000, the PRI lost the presidency but ceded power to the right wing, represented by Vicente

Fox and the National Action Party (PAN). The democratic transition was curtailed by inequities in the 2006 presidential election, promoted by Fox. This placed the country's democratic institutions in a highly questionable situation (Meyer, 2015, p. 19).

The 2006 electoral campaign—based on smear propaganda against the leftist candidate—the «war on drugs» launched by Felipe Calderón (Pereyra, 2012, pp. 429-430), along with rising insecurity and corruption, led to the executive power returning to the PRI in 2012 (Meyer, 2015, p. 22)<sup>1</sup>. Under Peña Nieto, corruption and criminal violence escalated, accompanied by repression of dissent. Social indignation was particularly marked by the disappearance of 43 students from the Ayotzinapa Rural Teachers' College, perpetrated by the Mexican state.

The return of the old authoritarian PRI regime ended with an overwhelming victory for the left in 2018. Organized under the banner of the National Regeneration Movement (Morena), Andrés Manuel López Obrador—running for the presidency for the third time—emerged as the leader who united, under charismatic leadership, «the support of a multi-class sector without party affiliation» (Meyer, 2020, p. 360).

The main criticisms of AMLO's administration concern the ineffective security strategy (Ramos, 2022; Pineda, 2023)<sup>2</sup>, mismanagement of the COVID-19 pandemic (Espinosa Rosete, 2021)<sup>3</sup>, complacency with military power, and the extreme confrontational discourse with the opposition in Las mañaneras, the daily press conferences held in public media.

On the other hand, some social advances were recognized during AMLO's administration, such as a significant increase in the minimum wage and regulation of labor contracting practices through outsourcing or collective agreements. Together with social programs, this contributed to lifting 5.1 million Mexicans out of poverty between 2018 and 2022 (Coneval, 2023)—a factor that could influence the reduction of social polarization.

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1 The number of deaths from violence during Calderón's administration is estimated at 64,744 (Meyer, 2015, p. 22). According to Pereyra (2012, p. 437), Calderón's military campaign against drug trafficking—alongside the war among drug cartels—was the reason for the increase in violence in Mexico. The national homicide rate rose from 8 to 18 murders per 100,000 inhabitants between 2008 and 2009.

2 At 42 months into López Obrador's administration, approximately 122,000 intentional homicides had been recorded—more than those that occurred during the same period under the governments of Felipe Calderón (53,300) or Peña Nieto (74,700) (Ramos, 2022).

3 Espinosa Rosete (2021), based on a report from the Ministry of Health, estimates that by October 2021 there had been 550,000 deaths from the COVID-19 pandemic in Mexico.

## Digital Social Networks, Polarization, and Conflict

The internet emerged within the context of neoliberal expansion, following the structural exhaustion of Keynesian capitalism in the 1970s (Crovi, 2002, pp. 13-14). Platforms such as digital social networks are neither horizontal, neutral, nor free (Van Dijck, 2016; De León, 2019). Their use is paid for with the imprint of our digital habits, and their purpose is to accelerate the production of commodities to ensure consumption through strategies of advertising, innovation, and planned obsolescence.

Zuboff (2020, p. 9) refers to surveillance capitalism as the new economic order that claims human experience as free raw material, exploitable for a series of hidden practices of data extraction that companies place in behavioral markets. Our right to privacy and free will are subordinated to a new instrumental power that poses alarming contradictions for democracy and fosters disaffection toward its institutions (Zuboff, 2020; García Canclini, 2021).

Tucker et al. (2018, pp. 3-4) find that digital platforms foster political polarization—hyperpartisan positions—and the prevalence of disinformation. In these dynamics, politicians themselves play an important role by creating disinformation or amplifying that which originates elsewhere.

Facebook, created by Mark Zuckerberg in 2004 and implicated in multiple scandals over misuse of personal data (Vaidhyanathan, 2018, p. 3), is the most widely used social networking site in the Western world. Shortly before the COVID-19 pandemic, when the fieldwork for this research was conducted, it had 2.4 billion subscribers worldwide and a penetration rate of 63.4% in the Latin American population (Internet World Stats, 2020).

The main problem with Facebook lies in its mercantile logic of clickbaiting (Vaidhyanathan, 2018, p. 5). Page creators on this platform know that people are more likely to click on materials that provoke unreflective responses. Conspiratorial content provides sufficient attention to sustain a page through advertising revenue (Tucker et al., 2018, p. 18).

Thus, the priority of digital platform administrators is to keep users connected for longer periods, in order to increase excitement for new content. Likes serve as conduits to monetize information, promote content on users' feeds, and extract profile data. Consequently, the information we consume is a composite result of our network of acquaintances and what platforms decide we should see, fostering filter bubbles in which we are more inclined to validate personal or group beliefs than to verify what we encounter (Aruguete and Calvo, 2023).

In Mexico, there are Facebook pages and groups that follow a particular model of right-wing historical revisionism. They disparage figures

representing liberal, progressive, or revolutionary ideals. These sites also provide contact information on their interfaces for «advertising sales.» According to Faris et al. (2017, p. 17), hyperpoliticized clickbait groups and pages on Facebook exist on both sides of the political spectrum; they are more radical than those on X, and in the case of the 2016 U.S. elections, they were more pronounced on the right.

It should be noted that this instrumental version of the internet and digital platforms is only one aspect among the multiple uses and cultural appropriations made by social agents.

## **Discourse as Fundamental to the Configuration of Collective Identities**

Discourse is crucial for establishing collective bonds in an era when social categories of class or structure have been displaced by postmodern ones such as identity and culture (Santander, 2011, p. 208). Language is not considered merely a vehicle for reflecting ideas but a factor influencing the construction of social reality.

Žižek (1992, pp. 34-35) draws on Marx's notion of the symptom to refer to the dual meaning of reality: a first level visible on the surface of capitalist societies and another operating as a «phantasm» behind it, concealing the dimension of production relations that shape the visible plane. In this way, society is projected as exists under apparent conditions of equity, where the function of the phantasm—or superstructure—is to obscure a traumatic kernel: the antagonistic division that traverses it.

Any phenomenon that bourgeois consciousness perceives as a mere social deviation correctable—or «anomie»—is nothing more than a necessary product of the system itself. The notion of the symptom can be applied to discourse, where the level of circulation of discourses is not necessarily what occurs at the level of their production (Santander, 2011, p. 219).

Within the multimedia and multimodal framework of the internet, power relations are configured as cognitive, axiological, and agential orientations. The inclusion of political discourse in this media ecosystem aims to inform, persuade, and legitimize the actions of specific individuals and collectives. One of its characteristics is the reinforcement of power relations with the purpose of constructing systems of expectations frequently articulated to strengthen the agential position of an imagined user, to whom appeals are made, roles are attributed, and the manner of decoding information is defined (Pardo, 2016, p. 179).

## Discursive War in the Media Ecosystem during the 4T

Various analyses identify a polarizing dynamic in the discourse of the Fourth Transformation (4T) government. It is emphasized that AMLO constructed, through Las mañaneras, a dichotomous narrative in which he disqualified those he considered adversaries (Samaniego, 2023; Larrosa-Fuentes, 2023). This exercise in social communication resulted in a political arena complemented by YouTube, X, and Instagram, creating a clear division between those who supported the president and those who criticized him (Iturralde, 2022). The media with which AMLO clashed, in turn, addressed only the sector that did not support the 4T (Larrosa-Fuentes, 2023).

Bak (2023, p. 8) posits a linguistic lynching orchestrated by intellectuals of the Mexican bourgeoisie against López Obrador's discourse. They considered it a threat to the monopoly of language held by those who assume themselves to be the only ones authorized to speak on public matters, in the sense of the symbolic domination proposed by Bourdieu (1985). The label populism was the conceptual weapon these voices used to strip any colloquial communicative practice of rational pretension, deeming it neither «modern» nor «rational» (Bak, p. 19)<sup>4</sup>.

A common element in these narratives is the centrality of AMLO's figure in the binary confrontations between supporters and opponents of the politician (Signa\_Lab, 2019a; Estrada and Martínez, 2023). Another key actor in this dynamic is Felipe Calderón, who played an active role on social media through his constant attacks on the 4T government, generating both repudiation and support (Signa\_Lab, 2019a).

Rodríguez (2020) identifies three main narratives during AMLO's administration: the official one, with a redistributive policy project opposed to the concrete interests of certain politicians and business elites; the second, a «politically correct» elitism expressing concern over López Obrador's polarizing discourse; and, beyond both, the narrative of resistance as genuine antisystemic interpellation: women confronting patriarchal violence; victims of criminal violence; Indigenous communities

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<sup>4</sup> According to Zepeda (2024), the label populism is used indiscriminately to refer equally to far-right movements in Europe, the breakdown of mature democracies in the United States and England, and regimes oriented toward addressing ancestral poverty in Latin America—while requiring cautious differentiation in the case of right-wing authoritarian governments such as Bukele's in El Salvador. Brown and Mondon (2021) warn of the dangers of the uncritical use of the term *populism*. On the one hand, it leads to the euphemization and trivialization of far-right movements such as nationalism by labeling them populist, while on the other, the negative connotation of the word is displaced onto the working class.

resisting extractivism; and other actors affected by the contradictions of the so-called «Fourth Transformation.»

## Methodology

The universe of analysis in this study consists of the Facebook group *«Historia, política y cultura general»* (hereafter referred to simply as «H»), dedicated to universal and Mexican history with the purpose of debating historical and public issues. It is not a clickbait group, although its users often share such content.

The group was selected after obtaining prior permission from its administrators to extract data from comments. At the time of fieldwork, it had more than 14,000 members. The main objective is to investigate whether the comments in group H are oriented toward debate or instead break down into affective content.

It is emphasized that the analyzed content was extracted from the group's news feed, which has an open privacy configuration, and under the consent of the administrators, as well as the awareness of the users participating in the conversation, who knew that I was conducting research for my doctoral dissertation, from which this article derives (Iturralde, 2021). The identities of both administrators and participants in the discussions are kept anonymous. To protect their privacy, no links to the comments of users cited in the analysis are included.

A manual critical discourse analysis (CDA) was conducted on the 10 posts with the highest number of likes, comments, and reactions in group H during the fieldwork period (October 15-31, 2019), according to the Grytics tool. The analysis draws on Van Dijk's (1996, p. 24) paradigm of ideological critical discourse analysis, in which different social collectives construct positive self-representations (*ingroup*) based on the negative representation of the other (*outgroup*). Group polarization is thus expressed through discursive devices of persuasion: metaphors, hyperboles, apparent denials or concessions, lexicalization, presuppositions, or euphemisms (Van Dijk, 1996; Ararat, 2010).

The material analyzed consisted of 10 posts generating 1,170 comments. It included linguistic and visual resources such as memes and emojis. It is noteworthy that the analysis period coincided with a convulsive stage, due to the #Culiacanazo.

The #Culiacanazo or «Black Thursday» occurred on October 17, 2019, when federal forces captured drug trafficker Ovidio Guzmán, «El Chapito,» in Culiacán, Sinaloa. The response of the Sinaloa Cartel, the criminal organization to which Guzmán belonged, was to seize the streets of Culiacán

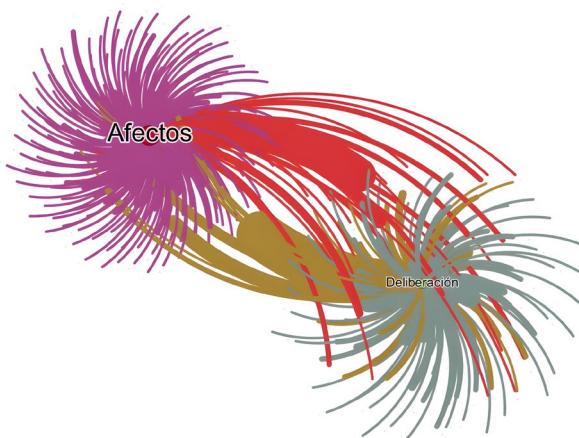
with armed men and attack government facilities, generating terror and chaos. Faced with escalating violence and the risk to civilians, the Mexican government made the controversial decision to release Guzmán (Signa Lab, 2019b).

The events transcended into the digital sphere through hashtags such as *#Culiacanazo*. Parallel studies found polarization on X (then Twitter) in discussions of the issue. The conversation split into two main groups: those in favor and those against the decision of the 4T government (Estrada and Martínez, 2023). The polarizing dynamic was driven by bots to hinder organic deliberation (Signa Lab, 2019b).

**TABLE 1.** The 10 posts analyzed from the Facebook group H (October 15-31 2019).

Topics	Posts	Reactions and Likes	Comments
Failed federal government operation to capture «El Chapito» in Sinaloa.	3	36	456
PAN mayors receive tear gas when attempting to forcibly enter the National Palace to demand more budget	2	18	196
Human remains found in Santería altars in the Tepito neighborhood	1	16	171
Two million German women were raped after the Soviet Union's occupation of East Germany. The intent of the post is to argue that communism and feminism are contradictory	1	11	94
General Felipe Ángeles, figure of the Mexican Revolution	1	26	88
Massive protests by Catalans in Barcelona	1	18	84
Meme about Antorcha Campesina (PRI shock group).	1	7	81

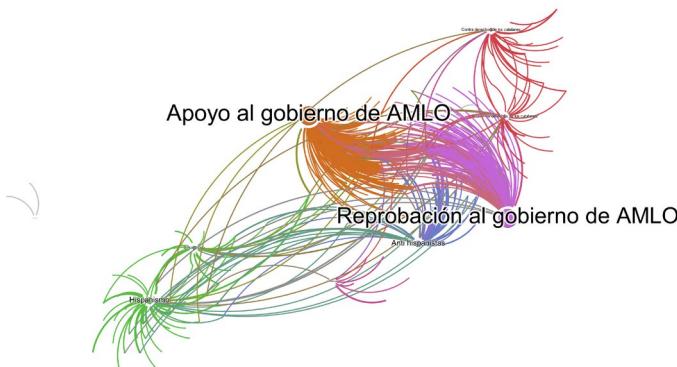
Following the critical discourse analysis (CDA), a first finding was the predominance of affective or polarized content («affects»), accounting for 65% of the total material, compared to 35% of deliberative comments (see Figure 1). The category «*deliberation*» was applied to messages in which users engaged in rational debates. The category «*affects*» includes insults, attacks, but also mockery or irony.



**FIGURE 1.** Semantic network between analyzed comments and the categories of deliberation and affect  
Note. The graph is composed of 1,170 comments resulting in 345 nodes and 378 edges. Prepared by the author using the Gephi tool.

## Discursive Groups

Another finding of the CDA was the identification of the main groups or clusters of comments. The principal category consisted of messages supporting AMLO's government, accounting for 34% of the total (orange cluster in Figure 2), while those opposing it represented 30% (violet cluster). In this topic and in other posts, binary positions were observed along a conservative-progressive spectrum, regarding issues such as Hispanism (those who support the «rose-colored legend» that no massacres of Indigenous peoples occurred during the Spanish conquest of the Americas, green cluster); anti-Hispanists (blue cluster); those who support marches defending the rights of Catalans in Barcelona (red cluster) and those who do not (red-lilac cluster); those who believe Soviet soldiers were rapists (pink cluster) or that it was merely Nazi propaganda (gray cluster). Only one mediating group was identified, which supported multiculturalism and employed rhetorical resources of deliberation (green cluster adjacent to the Hispanism cluster).



**FIGURE 2.** Correlation graph between comments and users' ideological positions

Note. Graph composed of 337 nodes and 448 edges. Distributed using the OpenOrd algorithm to openly display the different discursive clusters.

## Rhetorical Structures

The main rhetorical-discursive structures identified in the CDA were the following:

**Lexicalizations (frequency of the category, 110):** words used to refer to other people in a negative manner (Van Dijk, 1996). In the post about right-wing mayors who attempted to violently enter the headquarters of the Executive Branch and were repelled with tear gas, a user employed a series of negative adjectives to describe individuals with progressive identities («chairo», feminists («femiloca»), dissident teachers («delincuentes de la CNTE»), and teachers from rural normal schools («anormalistas»)):

If that's how they treat mayors... what can we expect when the chairo lose their fascination with that disgusting president, and go out to make a mess?... Neither the femiloca nor the anarchists nor the CNTE delinquents and anormalistas were treated that way... and these last ones are kidnappers and petty thieves (*User 1, October 22, 2019*).

**Presuppositions (frequency, 87):** inferences based on negative models of others. Information is presented as «true» and therefore presupposed in discourse (Van Dijk, 1996). Someone defended the federal government's non-confrontational strategy during *#ElCuliacanazo*. The user assumed that their interlocutor had an emotional problem due to their opinions against former president AMLO (who is from Tabasco):

Leaving aside your obvious trauma with the Tabasqueño, I don't know if you understand that there was no sufficient reinforcement against a greater force, and it would have resulted in a massacre (*User 2, October 18, 2019*).

**Hyperboles (frequency, 35):** exaggerated descriptions of the negative characteristics of others or of situations in which they participate, attributing apocalyptic dimensions to them (Van Dijk, 1996). One user considered that the federal government appeared «weak and spineless» for not confronting the drug group with armed force. They generalized by referring to those who defended the strategy of releasing Ovidio Guzmán as a «laughingstock» persons (User 3, October 18, 2019).

**Euphemisms (frequency, 17):** rhetorical structures that mitigate, minimize, or excuse new forms of racism (Van Dijk, 2006, p. 385). In the post about Santería altars with human remains found in the Tepito neighborhood, a user justified the genocide committed by Spanish conquerors against Caribbean Indigenous peoples and argued that the same should be done to those responsible for the altars:

They were savages; they should exterminate this rabble in the same way (User 4, October 27, 2019).

## Word Cloud

When generating a word cloud from the CDA (see Figure 3), two main nodes were identified around which confrontation developed. On one side were the initials of Andrés Manuel López Obrador (AMLO), and on the other, the surname of former president Felipe Calderón.

This finding confirms the trend observed in a pilot study I conducted with the same group (Iturralde, 2019), for the doctoral dissertation from which this research derives (Iturralde, 2021): members engaged in confrontations based on binary political positions that generated a sense of identity.

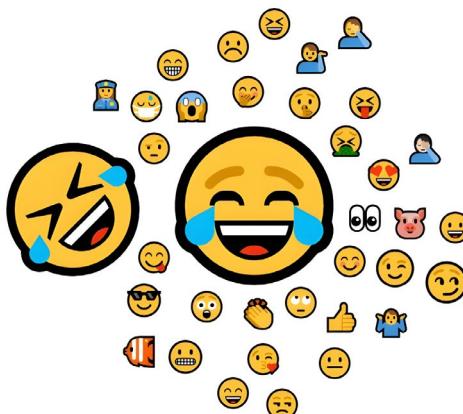
A series of lexicalizations were detected around both political figures: AMLO («ganso,» «viejito,» «incompetente,» «Amloco,» «pejeasno,» «inepto,»), his supporters («chairo,» «lamehuevos,» «Pejepets,» «progresía,» «adoctrinados»); and Felipe Calderón («borracho,» «borolas,» «Fecal,» «alcohólico,» «beodo»), along with his supporters («fifís,» «conservadores,» «prianistas,» «pejefóbicos,» «Amlohaters»).



**FIGURE 3.** Word cloud extracted from CDA of the analyzed sample

# Emoji Cloud

Another useful indicator for analyzing emotions in digital social networks is emojis: pictographic characters widely used in text-based communication (Miller et al., 2016, p. 259). From a cloud generated with the emojis in the sample, the most frequent pictogram was laughter, followed by the laughing face and the sly smile. As Miller et al. (2016) caution, emojis may have different meanings depending on interpretation. In the context of the sample, laughter, laughing faces, and sly smiles signified mockery of opposing opinions. In the case of the wink and sunglasses emojis, they were used to display moral superiority, similar to a *touché* in verbal fencing.



**FIGURE 4.** Emoji cloud found in the analyzed sample from the group «Historia»

## Conclusions

The findings of this study are presented at two levels. The first is that of the symptom or surface level. Within the analyzed universe, I identified a phenomenon of social, affective, and political polarization, in which some members adopted identity-based positions grounded in dichotomous reductions of reality. Users configured semiotic-discursive representations shaped by struggles between two main groups that confronted each other during the period of analysis, assuming diametrically opposed ideological positions around the various topics of discussion in the group. Opposing camps were formed between progressives and conservatives, right and left, spokespersons of discriminatory rhetoric, and those who attempted to debate with them or repelled them through insults and disqualifications.

These representations of division, manifested in confrontations between ideological factions, resulted in polarized and polarizing dynamics. Through persuasive linguistic strategies, participants constructed social representations by disparaging the «other.» Rational deliberation was thus stifled by affects—emotions such as anger and diatribes against those deemed unworthy of debate or of questioning personal biases. Consequently, controversial topics such as the #Culiacanazo in October 2019 became exit nodes that exploded into affective and confrontational connotations, exponentially amplified by Facebook's algorithmic and clickbait dynamics, under a mercantile logic that reinforced users' cognitive biases.

Although this article focuses on audience perceptions, the posts that generated the comments were primarily based on news reports from mass and digital media, but also on provocative messages posted by group administrators or memes shared by users seeking the reward of visibility provided by likes and comments<sup>5</sup>.

Regarding the research questions on the dynamics of polarization in the analyzed group and the role of politicians in them, based on the fieldwork findings, I can assert a possible performative correlation between the discourse of political and economic groups in society and their supporters in the digital media environment. As observed in the graph in Figure 2, the conversation with the greatest centrality during the analysis period revolved around messages of support or disapproval not only of AMLO's government decision but also of the overall management of his administration.

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5 For further information on the content of the publications, see the doctoral dissertation from which this article derives (Iturralde, 2021).

The presence of former president Felipe Calderón also stands out, as he was the object of negative lexicalizations but also of affinities from users who defended him to assume a position within the public debate. Thus, there appears to be a dynamic in which polarization descends from public figures, politicians, parties, businesses, media outlets, and opinion leaders, permeating citizen discussions that collapse into diatribes.

Nevertheless, as observed in the graph in Figure 1, 35% of the analyzed conversation was deliberative. While one might consider that two central filter bubbles were identified in the critical discourse analysis, the reality is that ideological cross-cutting also exists in users' interactions on digital platforms, as Tucker et al. (2018) also found in their review of studies of polarization.

At the kernel level, users' interrelation schemes within the media ecosystem are also traversed by the structures of political and economic power in specific sociohistorical contexts. In the case of Latin American countries, social conflict and political polarization—alongside affective polarization—are inherent to the antagonistic nature of postindustrial capitalist societies. This is intensified in Global South countries, where democratic consolidation is constantly disputed between two main camps:

- A local oligarchy that reproduces itself by fostering subjectivities contrary to solidarity bonds among people. These are internalized by citizens who disdain welfare-state policies that, for example, prioritize strategies of social redress over punitive measures.
- A progressive wing oriented toward social demands, but often represented by politicians who reignite social conflict through militant discourse replicated by their bases of support.

Hence arises the important need for phenomenological and cultural approaches to address social and affective polarization—approaches that decipher how political discourse imbues identities with meaning by proposing forms of agency through hegemonic and counter-hegemonic narratives that offer diverse ways of inhabiting the world. Equally necessary is the reconsideration of negative conceptions of discursive constructions that aggregate diverse popular demands, so they may be included in political agendas, in the construction of a *We* that antagonizes hegemonic groups of big capital, under signifiers filled with meaning for historically marginalized sectors. This phenomenon is often dismissed as «irrational» or «empirical» by the liberal rationality model.

Excluded from the analyzed dispute are the demands of vulnerable and antagonistic sectors that were not supported by the first 4T government and also suffered the diatribes of the president and his followers:

feminist collectives, migrants, searching mothers, Zapatista groups, or the families of the disappeared students of Ayotzinapa.

This study is qualitative, and its conclusions cannot be generalized. To analyze in depth the concept of hateful subjectivities, ethnographic resources—such as open or semi-structured interviews—are necessary. Thus, this work is only an approximation to the subject.

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Enrique Iturralde Chaparro fulfilled all credit phases.

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