casta

by Natalia Osorio Ruiz

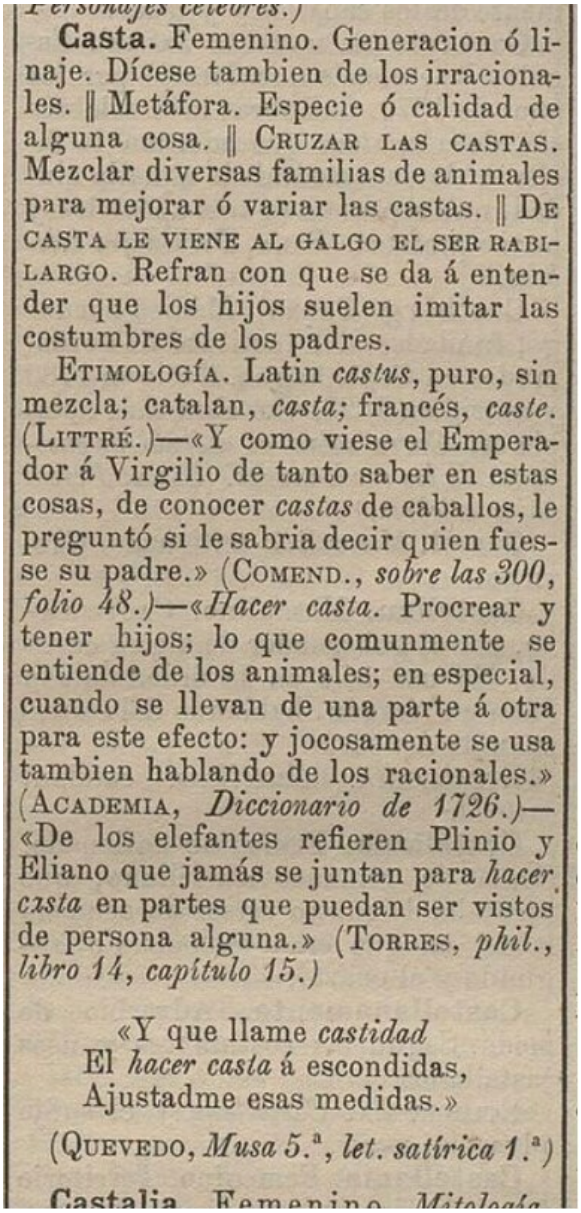
Abstract:

À partir du cas du lexème casta, cette entrée interroge les conditions dans lesquelles un terme ordinaire, historiquement associé à la lignée, à la pureté et à la classification animale, devient un opérateur central de disqualification dans le discours politique contemporain. Après avoir rappelé les principales étapes de sa circulation transnationale, depuis son ancrage dans le contexte italien jusqu'à ses réappropriations partisanes en Espagne, l'analyse se concentre sur l'usage qu'en fait Javier Milei dans l'espace médiatique argentin. La rareté relative du terme en Amérique latine constitue ici une ressource discursive décisive, permettant sa stabilisation comme mot-slogan et sa reconfiguration sémantique. Loin de désigner uniquement la «classe politique», casta fonctionne comme un geste de nomination qui agrège des acteurs hétérogènes et produit une polarisation discursive durable. Nous observons enfin que cette catégorisation se déploie au-delà du verbal, à travers des dispositifs iconographiques et sémiodiscursifs qui contribuent à la construction de l'ethos et à la redéfinition des rapports de légitimité dans l'espace public.

This entry examines ***casta*** as a **political keyword** in **Javier Milei**'s discourse. It shows how a relatively uncommon term is **redefined** and **stabilized** as a **slogan** that names, unifies, and **disqualifies political opponents**, contributing to **discursive polarization** and the **construction** of **political legitimacy**.

Etymology:

According to the *Diccionario general etimológico de la lengua española* (Echegaray, 1887), *casta* would derive from the Latin ***castus***, corresponding to the idea of "**purity**, **without mixture**." Its usage is generally associated with **animals**, as illustrated by expressions such as "castes of horses" or "to make caste", defined as "to reproduce and have offspring; what is commonly said of animals." The definition proposed by this dictionary also refers to "**generation** or **lineage**," with a constant association with the animal world.
In his *Diccionario crítico etimológico* (Corominas, 1984, p. 914), Corominas questions the association with the Latin *castus*, noting that the lexical evolution of the term remains unclear. According to him, one possible origin lies in the inheritance of "**Gothic forms** […] ***kasts** (or perhaps ***kasteri**), which, in other regions, may have taken the -a ending under the influence of grammatical gender," without any definitive conclusion being possible. Corominas nevertheless confirms the historical origin of the term's usage through its **association** with **animal species**, adding that around **1516** the **Portuguese** employed the term to refer to the "**castes** or **hereditary social classes** of India, deprived of mixture and contact with others." This usage subsequently spread widely, including into other languages, while retaining, in his view, an original anchoring in the animal domain.



Casta. Femenino. Generacion ó linaje. Dícese tambien de los irracionales. ‖ Metáfora. Especie ó calidad de alguna cosa. ‖ CRUZAR LAS CASTAS. Mezclar diversas familias de animales para mejorar ó variar las castas. ‖ DE CASTA LE VIENE AL GALGO EL SER RABILARGO. Refran con que se da á entender que los hijos suelen imitar las costumbres de los padres.

ETIMOLOGÍA. Latin *castus*, puro, sin mezcla; catalan, *casta;* francés, *caste.* (LITTRÉ.)—«Y como viese el Emperador á Virgilio de tanto saber en estas cosas, de conocer *castas* de caballos, le preguntó si le sabria decir quien fuese su padre.» (COMEND., *sobre las 300, folio 48.*)—«*Hacer casta.* Procrear y tener hijos; lo que comunmente se entiende de los animales; en especial, cuando se llevan de una parte á otra para este efecto: y jocosamente se usa tambien hablando de los racionales.» (ACADEMIA, *Diccionario de 1726.*)—«De los elefantes refieren Plinio y Eliano que jamás se juntan para *hacer casta* en partes que puedan ser vistos de persona alguna.» (TORRES, *phil., libro 14, capítulo 15.*)

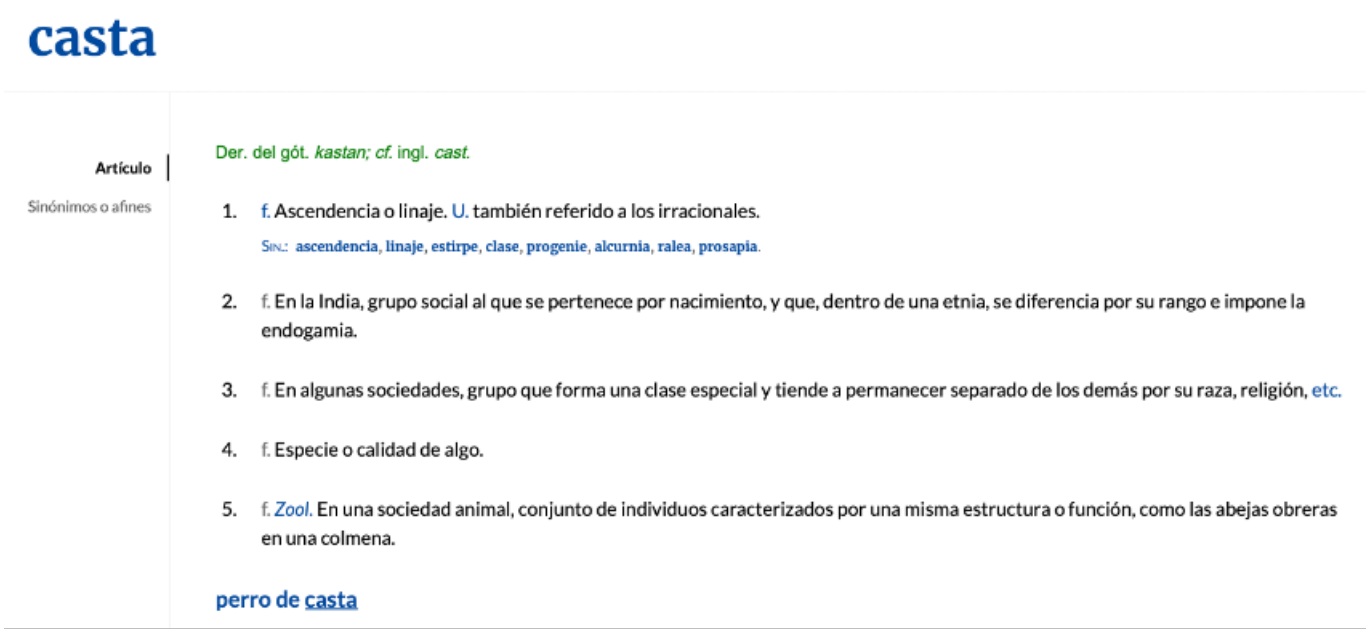
«Y que llame *castidad*
El *hacer casta* á escondidas,
Ajustadme esas medidas.»

(QUEVEDO, *Musa 5.ª, let. satírica 1.ª*)

Castalia. Femenino. *Mitología*

Definition from the *Diccionario general etimológico de la lengua española* (Echegaray, 1887)

It can be observed that this **usage persists** and that **contemporary definitions** preserve the **two** main **historically** associated **meanings**. The lexeme *casta* is thus defined by the *Real Academia Española* (RAE, 2024) as **ancestry** or **lineage**, with a specific use referring, in India and in certain societies, to a group belonging to a "**special class**" separated from others. More generally, it may also refer to a **species** or a **quality**. Finally, the **zoological definition**—perro de casta ("purebred dog")—refers to a categorization based on **genetic continuity**. This last usage is not insignificant, insofar as it represents one of the most frequent contexts in which the term is employed.



casta

Artículo | Sinónimos o afines

Der. del gót. *kastan; cf.* ingl. *cast.*

1. f. Ascendencia o linaje. U. también referido a los irracionales.
   Sin.: ascendencia, linaje, estirpe, clase, progenie, alcurnia, ralea, prosapia.
2. f. En la India, grupo social al que se pertenece por nacimiento, y que, dentro de una etnia, se diferencia por su rango e impone la endogamia.
3. f. En algunas sociedades, grupo que forma una clase especial y tiende a permanecer separado de los demás por su raza, religión, etc.
4. f. Especie o calidad de algo.
5. f. *Zool.* En una sociedad animal, conjunto de individuos caracterizados por una misma estructura o función, como las abejas obreras en una colmena.

perro de casta

RAE definition (consulted on April 12, 2025)

Cultural specificity:

The term *casta* gained prominence in its **political usage** following the publication of the book «***La casta. Così i politici italiani sono diventati intoccabili***» (The Caste: How Italian Politicians Became Untouchable), written by Sergio Rizzo and Gian Antonio Stella, **journalists** for the Milanese daily *Corriere della Sera,* and published in **2007**. In this essay, the authors analyse the place of **corruption** in **Italian politics**, highlighting waste, scandals, and unjustified privileges. They employ this lexeme to designate a **closed** and **enduring political class** that **protects** its **members** and **benefits** from **institutional privileges**. The authors explicitly draw on a reference to Hindu culture, in a deliberate nod to the widespread use of the term:

> *«Dei bramini, ecco cosa sono diventati i politici italiani. Partoriti non da Brahma (Davvero grandi sono gli dei nati da Brahma» dice la genesi dell'Atharvaveda, una delle opere sacre dell'induismo), ma da un sistema partitocratico malato di elefantiasi»* ["Here are the Brahmins: this is what Italian politicians have become. Born not from Brahma ('Truly great are the gods born of Brahma,' says the genesis of the Atharvaveda, one of the sacred texts of Hinduism), but from a party-based system afflicted with elephantiasis"], (Rizzo & Stella, 2007).

This reference serves as a foundation for their **metaphorical conceptualization** of the term:

> *«Tutti insieme, però, sono una casta. Che si sente al di sopra della società della quale si proclama al servizio. Tanto che i più attenti, quelli che non vivono 'solo' di politica e magari scrivono anche romanzi o biografie sofferte di musicisti tragici, come Walter Veltroni, non si sognano di bollare le critiche come demagogiche: "Quando i partiti si fanno casta di professionisti, la principale campagna antipartiti viene dai partiti stessi"»* [*"Taken together, however, they form a caste. One that feels itself above the society it claims to serve. So much so that the most perceptive among them, those who do not live 'only' off politics and who may also write novels or anguished biographies of tragic musicians, such as Walter Veltroni, would never dream of branding criticism as demagogic: "When **parties** turn into a **caste** of **professionals**, the main anti-party campaign comes from the parties themselves."*], (Rizzo & Stella, 2007).

The authors thus propose a **now-stabilized usage** of the **term** in direct association with the **political class**: «*Ancora più stupefacente però, agli storici del futuro, appariranno le reazioni sull'*Adige *della casta dei privilegiati trentini davanti alle polemiche sui vitalizi* » ["Even more astonishing, however, to future historians, will be the reactions in the *Adige* newspaper of the privileged Trentino caste to the controversy over lifetime pensions"].

This meaning of the **lexeme**, initially anchored in the Italian context and particularly embraced by Beppe Grillo's Five Star Movement, subsequently **extended beyond national borders**.

Indeed, the term experienced renewed momentum in the **Spanish context from 2014 onward**, following the creation of the **radical left party Podemos** (Manetto, 2014), where it was used to designate traditional political parties (particularly the PP and PSOE) and their institutional representatives. *Casta* thus became a key word in the party's ideological discourse:

> *"Podemos's supporters see [politicians] as in cahoots with big business and dub them the casta, or caste. 'Against all authority,' reads one. '40 years of dictatorship, plus 35 for the tip,' says another. Stickers with the Twitter hashtag '#Castaeverywhere' litter walls, desks and chairs.'* (Mateo, 2015).

Gómez Urzaiz recalls that, in this context, the term functioned as a particularly effective discursive tool for the party:

> *«La casta servía al Podemos recién nacido para trazar un eje vertical (los que tienen versus los que no tienen) en lugar de horizontal (izquierda versus derecha)»* [*"The casta allowed the newly born Podemos to draw a vertical axis (those who have versus those who do not) instead of a horizontal one (left versus right)."*], (Gómez Urzaiz, 2021).
>
> Paradoxically, this term, mobilized by the **radical left in 2014**, is now **taken up by the Spanish far right**, embodied by the **Vox party**:
>
> *«Para José Rama, politólogo y uno de los autores del libro* Vox. The Rise of The Spanish Populist Radical Right*, editado por Routledge, el uso que Vox estaría haciendo de "casta" sería una evolución de otros conceptos que ese partido ya utilizó en su primer impulso electoral. "Lo que ahora es la casta antes era la anti-España o los enemigos de la patria o los progres."* ["For José Rama, a political scientist and one of the authors of *Vox. The Rise of the Spanish Populist Radical Right*, published by Routledge, Vox's current use of 'casta' represents an evolution of other concepts the party had already used during its initial electoral breakthrough. 'What is now the casta used to be anti-Spain, the enemies of the homeland, or the progressives.'"*»,* (Gómez Urzaiz, 2021).

This **transnational circulation** of the lexeme *casta*, from its **cultural anchoring in Italy** to **its partisan reappropriations in Spain**, sets the stage for its **discursive investment** in **other political contexts**. However, *casta* remained a relatively rare term in **Latin America**. It is precisely this **rarity** that contributes to its salience in **Javier Milei's discourse**, as he appropriates it to the point of **proposing** a **personal** and **stabilized definition** within the media space, which constitutes the point of entry for the analysis developed here.

Problematization:

Designating the **political adversary** through the term *casta* constitutes, in Javier Milei's discourse, a particularly **salient act of nomination**. The choice of this lexeme, which is relatively infrequent in the contemporary Latin American context, confers upon this designation a force of singularization that goes beyond the mere denunciation of the "political class." By mobilizing *casta* as a **global label**, Milei does not simply identify institutional actors; he **aggregates heterogeneous figures** under a **single signifier,** presented as **jointly responsible** for a **systemic dysfunction**.



Instagram post by Javier Milei.«The caste is: 1. Thieving politicians; 2. Privileged businessmen; 3. Submissive trade unions; 4. Bribed journalists; 5. Functional professionals.In today's episode, the econochantas (5) join forces with the envelope lovers (4) to save the thieving politicians (1).»

While the expression "**political caste**" appears occasionally, the **predominant use** of the **isolated term** contributes to its **lexicalization** as a **slogan-word**, immediately recognizable and stabilized within the **public sphere**. This stabilization is reinforced by an explicit definition proposed on **social media**, which functions as an **interpretive frame** imposed on its recipients. The list of **targeted figures**—**politicians**, **businessmen**, **unions**, **journalists**, and **professionals**—produces a **discursive homogenization** of the **enemy**, each category being associated with a negatively charged axiological qualification.

This act of nomination thus produces an effect of semantic closure: **internal distinctions** between social or professional groups **are erased** in favour of a **compact** and **morally disqualified representation** of **political otherness**.

Communication strategies:

Milei's definition of *casta* (as above presented) is **not limited** to a **static enumeration.** It is extended through a minimal narrative framing that gives the typology an explanatory dynamic. The **opening** with a **serializing marker** ("in today's episode") inscribes the discourse within a logic of progressive revelation, suggesting the existence of an **ongoing saga of corruption** in which **Milei** positions himself as a privileged **narrator**.

The established categories are reformulated through **new pejorative designations**—most notably the neologism ***econochantas*** [economistas+chantas = fraudster economists]—thereby reinforcing the **disqualification** of **expert figures**. The narrative articulates a simplified causal chain: **experts** and **media** appear as objective allies of political leaders, contributing to the **perpetuation** of an **unjust order**. This scenarization, in Maingueneau's (2004) sense, configures a scene of enunciation in which the speaker authorizes himself to reveal hidden alliances, thus instituting a **regime of truth** that competes with that of established institutions.

Construction of ethos and polarisation

The recurrent use of *casta* directly contributes to the construction of the speaker's ethos. **Milei** presents himself as an **actor externa**l to the **system,** capable of **naming** what **others conceal or naturalize**, thereby assuming an **ethos of denunciation**. This posture of revelation allows him to claim a form of **political competence detached from institutional experience,** grounded not in past governance but in critical lucidity, to which a **heroic dimension** is added.

In this way, the categorization operated through *casta* establishes a discursive polarization that opposes **an implicit collective — the people** — to a **homogenized** and **disqualified entity.** Far from merely describing social relations,

this operation actively produces them discursively by **assigning positions** of **legitimacy** and **illegitimacy** within the **public sphere**.

The persuasive force of this device thus lies in its capacity to pre-empt contradictory debate: the prior **disqualification** of the **adversary** reduces their possibilities of speaking and **reinforces** the internal coherence of the "**we**" constructed by the discourse.

The disqualifying categorization constructed through the term *casta* is not limited to the verbal register. It is accompanied by an **iconographic strategy** that reactivates the lexeme's **original association** with **animal classification**. Images disseminated by Milei on social media—particularly those generated by artificial intelligence—systematically oppose a "we" represented by the lion (left) to a "they" assimilated to rats (right), thereby reinforcing **moral polarization** and the **heroic ethos** of the speaker at a semiotic level.



The candidate and his supporters represented as lions.



The lion facing the rats.

This discursive polarization aligns with the mechanisms described by Lorenzi Bailly and Moïse (2023), according to whom **categorization**, **essentialization**, and **axiological disqualification** constitute **central drivers** of contemporary **hate speech**. This iconographic logic also extends to the semiotic-discursive détourning used during the campaign:



Semiotic-discursive détourning of Terminator.

In this example, **Milei appropriates** the well-known cinematic **figure** of Terminator, which he re-embodies in order to

present himself as the one who will '**terminate**' the *casta*, while also détourning the film's famous line.

Subversion:

The slogan-word *casta*, which became **central** during the **electoral campaign** that culminated in Javier Milei's election as President of the Argentine Republic, is **now used** by **citizens** and **unions** during **demonstrations** opposing his policies. Two examples illustrate this shift:



Photograph by Juan Manuel Hernández (UNO), demonstration in Paraná, March 8, 2024.
[We are not the casta]

In the photo above, **women**, **trans**, and **travesty individuals** who demonstrated on March 8, 2024, during the commemoration of International **Women's Rights Day,** used the term *casta* on their placards with the phrase "**we are not the casta,**" to **denounce** the **budgetary measures** and adjustments adopted by the Milei government, which **reduced coverage** and **protection** for **gender diversity policies**.



Photograph by Juan Mabromata / AFP, December 20, 2023.
[No to Milei's adjustement. At the end, the "casta" were the people]
Milei's 'ajduste' was a drastic and rapid fiscal austerity plan

Under similar conditions, the placard of the **Socialist Workers' Movement** is observed using the word *casta* during the first **demonstration** against Javier Milei's new government in **Buenos Aires.** This illustrates a use of the term initially chosen by Milei in order to **contest its definition** and **scope** of **application**, and to assert that the caste he claims to target does not include certain groups within society.

Discussion:

The analysis of *casta* invites a broader reflection on the conditions under which an **ordinary word** becomes an **operator** of **discrimination** in **public discourse**.

- What **social** and **media dynamics** underlie the **transformation** of a lexeme into a **slogan-word**?
- What **effects** does such **lexical disqualification** produce on **democratic debate**, the legitimacy of contradiction, and the structuring of political identities?
- Finally, comparison with other terms from contemporary populist rhetoric—such as "**elites**," "**system**," or "**establishment**"—would make it possible to examine the **transnational circulation** of these **discursive devices** and the **renewed forms of polarization** they help to institute.

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