oligarchy

by Cecilia Beaudoin

Abstract:

Oligarquía *es una palabra casi indisociable del* ***vocabulario peronista****. Proferida con fervorosa frecuencia por* ***Eva Perón*** *en sus discursos para identificar a los* ***enemigos*** *del "****pueblo trabajador****", ha quedado asimismo grabada para siempre en los textos que le han sido atribuidos. Este vocablo atravesó* ***las décadas*** *y los* ***discursos*** *postreros del siglo veinte en que se vio inmersa la Argentina.* ***Oligarquía*** *e* ***imperialismo*** *estuvieron estrechamente atrapados en un* ***vínculo indisoluble*** *dentro del campo adversario en las narraciones que posicionaban al peronismo como artífice de la liberación nacional en la estela de la Revolución Cubana. Un término que volvió a* ***resurgir*** *a principios del siglo veintiuno tras el* ***conflicto*** *que enfrentó al* ***gobierno peronista*** *de Cristina Kirchner con el campo.*

This entry intends to explore the term '**oligarchy**' as it has developed in the specific **Argentine political** and **cultural contexts**. Since its first occurrences in River Plate Spanish in the late 19th century, used when **criticizing** the **progressist governments** of the time following the consolidation of the national state in 1880, it was an invective very much in fashion during the early decades of the 20th century. It became a **relational term** in **anti-imperialistic political narratives** arising in the 1930's, to eventually assume the **role of the enemy of workers** fashioned by Peronism.

Etymology:

The term 'oligarchy' derives from the Latinized form of Greek *oligarkhia*, '**government by the few'**, from stem *oligos*, 'few, small, little' + *-arkhia*, from *arkhein*, 'to rule'.

In Ancient Greece, 'oligarchy' described **one** of several **possible forms of government**. Out of the five types that **Plato** mentions in ***The Republic***, the oligarchy is considered as one where '**as riches grows, vertu diminishes'**.

Aristotle defines it as a **deviation** of **aristocracy.** Aristocracy was meant to be **the government** of the *aristoi*, **the best**. Instead, in an oligarchy **power** belonged to a **small group of people** who intended to fulfill **their own interests.**

A **contemporary conceptualization** of the term 'oligarchy' points to a **state controlled by an exclusive elite**, which represents the **domination by a class** or sector biased by its own **particular socio-economic interests.**

Cultural specificity:

In the **first quarter** of the **21st century**, at least in Europe, **Russian capitalists** seem the natural referents of such signifiers as 'oligarch' and 'oligarchy'. These terms have now become synonymous with the **businessmen** who dramatically increased their wealth after the collapse of the USSR towards the end of the 20th century and the subsequent rise of capitalism in their country.

Yet, as recently reminded by **French journalist** Samuel Blumenfeld, the first time ***Le Monde*** had used the term '**oligarch**' **was** back in **1950** in reference to **rich Argentines** linked to political power in their country. This happened towards the end of Juan Perón's first presidential term.

However, during **Perón's** decade in **power**, between **1946** and **1955**, the term 'oligarchy' **did not refer**, unlike in the Russian case, **to** those **capitalists** that **benefited** from the **government's policies** (who were in fact favourably

considered by the official narrative as the 'national bourgeoisie'). Nor did the word 'oligarchy' describe a form of government like the ones theorized by Plato or Aristotle. In the **Argentina** of the **1950s**, and in subsequent decades, it was a **political term**. It was the name of the '**enemy**', the oppressor that **antagonized** with the '**workers'** in the **narrative** that would be known as **Peronism**.

Problematization:

In an attempt to **conceptualize** the term '**oligarchy**' as applied to **Latin America, historians** and **social scientists** have provided **theorical definitions** intending to establish its meaning as either **a social class** (composed by the rich) or a **political category** (a government made up of a reduced number of people).

These are, however, **retrospective constructions** elaborated in the 20th and 21st centuries to qualify the **elitist governments** which were responsible for the access of Argentina into the world market as of the latter decades of the 19th century. They also place the **landowning classes** engaging in the so-called 'agriculture export model' - which was part of the international division of labour- into the same mould.

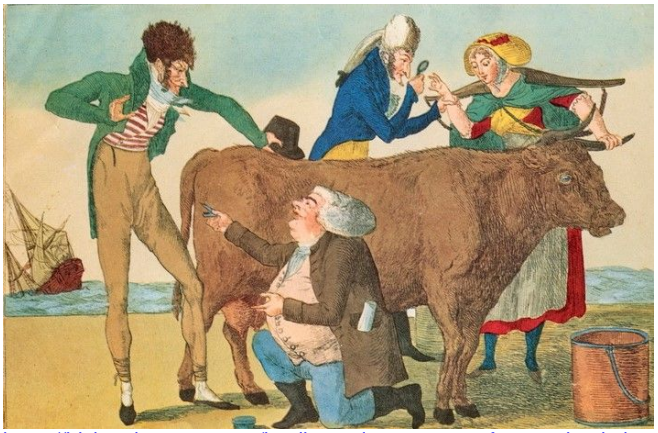
Changing perspective to that of **critical discourse analysis** as influenced by the linguistic turn, 'oligarchy' appears to be an empty or floating signifier present in various narratives, political and cultural. It emerged as the '**Other**', the '**Them**', in political narrations arising in **Argentina** as of **the mid 1930s** in reaction to what would thereafter be put down as **imperialism**, first **British** and later **American**.

Communication strategies:

Although occurrences of the term 'oligarchy' as an invective are registered as early as the end of the 19th century, it did not entail the **association** of the **governing elite** and **imperialism** before the **1930s**.

As a result of a **shift in the interpretation** of **Argentine history** that took place in that decade, the word was crafted to mean the '**enemy of the nation'**. Pioneering members of a new school of historiography called *Revisionismo Histórico* set about to 'revise' the young history of Argentina from a 'national' perspective as opposed to the 'liberal' tone of its former interpretation.

The first **revisionist book**, *La Argentina y el imperialismo británico*, published as **a reaction** to the **signature** of a **bilateral commercial treaty** between the **British** and the **Argentine governments**, included a 'History of the Oligarchy'. It was the first time the concept had been thematized. By establishing a filiation between the signatories of the **1933 London Treaty** and 19th century political personalities they did not particularly admire, the **revisionist historians** declared that 'The **mistakes** made by the **Argentine diplomatic mission** are so big that they cannot be explained as anything personal. Higher forces have gravitated which surpass the intellectual or moral incapacity of those who govern us [...] The cause of their **failure** is to be found in the **history of the oligarchy'**. These few words set the tone of a **political narration** that would continue to weave throughout the decades.



https://bichosdecampo.com/la-oligarquia-vacuna-ya-fue-en-el-pais-hay-mas-ganaderos-que-afiliados-al-gremio-de-camioneros/

Since Revisionismo Histórico*, pretty much all cattle-breeders became synonymous with the oligarchy.*

In **revisionist texts**, the floating or empty signifier '**oligarchy**' was **associated** to the following signifiers: **businessmen**, **bankers**, **lawyers** as well as **politicians** of all parties '**serving foreign interests'**. At the same time, a blatant **discursive division** was drawn between **cattle-breeders** and **fatteners** which placed the latter inside the nebulous word that was to designate the enemy.

The **use** of the **term** 'oligarchy' was certainly **not new** but it was the first time a '**history'** had been written of the **dignitaries** who, according to its writers, **were** more '**oligarchic'** than '**Argentine'**. This shows that, for revisionist authors, **belonging to** the **oligarchy** was **incompatible** with **being Argentine**.

To make things worse, the **actions** of the 'oligarchy' were meant to be part of a **succession** of **cause** and **effect** which meant that the **London Treaty** was the last link of a **fatally inevitable progression** that had started in 1806, the year of the first attempted **British Invasion** of the River Plate. Moreover, **betrayal** appeared to them as the force that triggered **Argentine history.** The London Treaty was taken as a **proof** of the oligarchy's '**cheating of national interests'**, showing its true **'foreign and antinational'** nature. The Liberals of the 19th century, the first 'oligarchs', had supposedly **betrayed the nation** when they took up exile.



Nadina Rubiños. *Caras y Caretas*, n° 2324, December 2016, pp.24-25
https://megafon.unla.edu.ar/nota/la-oligarquia-en-argentina

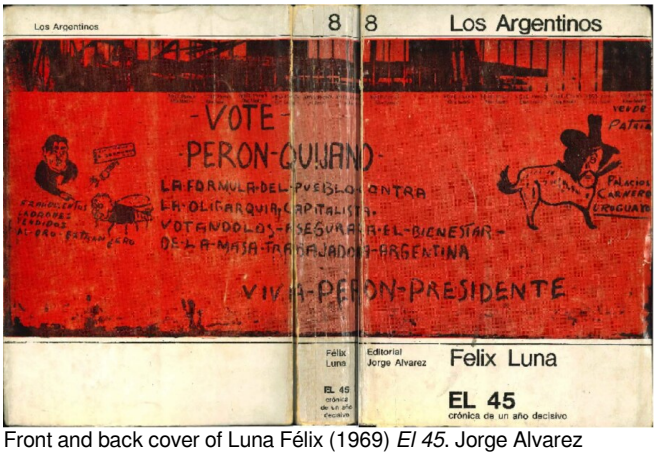
A recent illustration of a revisionist cliché on the history of Argentina. European industrialization and immigration versus Argentine land production in the hands of the oligarchy. Two boats that seem destined to remain always apart.

The slang '***garca***', a contraction of 'oligarca', has since grown to mean a '**cheater**', a '**swindler**', and is still currently used in the first quarter of the 21st century.

Furthermore, the 'oligarchy' **constructed by *Revisionismo Histórico*** was meant to conjure an image of **major conspirators.** But conspiracy as a theme was borrowed from a narrative that didn't originate in the world's southernmost country but in Europe: the big conspiracy theory. **Argentine nationalists** had been very much influenced by their readings, but also the acquaintance of Charles Maurras, Oswald Spengler, Hilaire Belloc, among others. The latter 'believed' in a **unique enemy** who was **scheming** to **dominate** the whole of **humankind.** The Left, liberals, anarchists, but also '**financial capitalists'** were associated to this **universal plot.** In the same way as Charles Maurras had elaborated an '**anti-France' theory,** according to which there existed 'foreigners acting from within receiving help from the British and the Prussians', **Argentine revisionists** invented a **local enemy** or a 'foreigner acting from within', the oligarchy, **conspiring** with **British imperialism** in an **anti-Argentine fashion**.

The **political narration** initiated by *Revisionismo Histórico* proved to be **very effective** in the following decades. The oligarchy had been well woven as the enemy of the nation.

However, **Perón** didn't use it straight away. When arriving in government as Minister of labour, he favoured a **narrative of unity** around the motive of **work.** Yet, when he did need to resort to this discursive weapon, the **oligarchy** became the **enemy** of the **working people**.



Front and back cover of Luna Félix (1969) *El 45*. Jorge Alvarez https://cedinpe.unsam.edu.ar/content/luna-felix-el-45-cronica-de-un-ano-decisivo-1

Book cover showing a reproduction of a grafitti on a wall of Buenos Aires in the run-up to the 1946 presidential election won by Perón. The people or the workers were to stand up against the 'capitalist oligarchy'.

That was precisely the moment the term evolved into the definition of 'oligarchy' in Latin America as provided by **Eric Hobsbawm**: the opponent of workers. In the wake of revisionism, the term 'oligarchy' had named and denounced a 'government in connivence with foreign interests'. Once Perón became president, he described his own government as one of workers. The 'oligarchy' was no longer in government then, and the term was largely uttered to point at the businessmen and sectors of society that did not see eye to eye with the government.

Subversion:

The term 'oligarchy' seems so **politicized** that it appears to be almost impossible to relieve it of its negative charge. However, the **use** of this word has enabled **Argentine political narrations** to operate a discursive and semantic shift of another signifier which **benefited** from this: the **bourgeoisie**, the antagonist of the proletariat in Marxist narrative of class struggle. With the oligarchy opposing the nation and later the workers in Argentine nationalist politics, a 'national bourgeoisie' was therefore **conceivable** as a **partner** of the **leading working class**.

Despite its appearance as a one and only thing, always having the same name, this **political word** is the perfect **example** of **dissensus**, as described by **Jacques Rancière**. 'Oligarchy' in Argentina is susceptible of **receiving numerous meanings** as a **function** of who is pointed at to be the **antagonist.**

Thus, at the end of the 19th century, a party of **rich landowners** from the province of Buenos Aires used the term 'oligarchy' to **denounce an elite** from the Northern provinces who, after the federalization of Buenos Aires, had taken over the country's government. At that time, the **word portrayed** a **group of outsiders** that had irrupted in Buenos Aires.

Later on, it would appear in expressions such as 'landowning oligarchy' or 'liberal oligarchy' in the wake of *Revisionismo Histórico*, and **associated to imperialism**.



Diana Mondino, appointed Foreign Minister in 2023 under Javier Milei's administration
https://www.lapatriadaweb.com.ar/mondino-el-paro-fue-convocado-por-la-oligarquia-de-millonarios

Foreign Minister of Javier Milei's Libertarian government (anti-Peronist), denouncing January 24th national strike organized by the CGT as being a scheme of 'an oligarchy of millionnaires' who feign representing workers.

In recent years, **anti-Peronist** former President Mauricio Macri has been nicknamed 'the oligarchic cat', cat also having a negative charge and several possible meanings. On the other hand, during the l**atest Peronist governments** led by Cristina Fernández de Kirchner, the expression '**Peronist oligarchy'** or even '**trade-union oligarchy'** (theoretically an oxymoron in Perón's day) have made an appearance. The term has clearly been **taken over by the opposition,** which reveals the **perpetual resignification of words** in **political narratives**.

The use of the term oligarchy as it has developed through 20th century Argentina might be a **paradigm** of how **relational terms** in politics work. The inevitable 'Other' in political narrations is always reappropriated and resignified to suit the political agenda of the moment, but so is the 'Us' that stands against 'Them'. This underscores the importance of **deconstructing** tightly-woven **narratives** in order to make sense of what we read and hear, but also to **raise awareness** of the **stories we reproduce,** more often than not without knowing we do.

Discussion:

- What words can you think of that might be associated to the enemy in political narratives circulating in your country?
- How does 'oligarchy' sit historically in your culture in the balance between money and power?

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How to cite this entry: Beaudoin, C. (2024). Oligarchy. *In Other Words. A Contextualized Dictionary to Problematize Otherness.* Published: 08 May 2024. [https://www.iowdictionary.org/word/oligarchy, accessed: 28 November 2026]