

READING THE FAR RIGHT BEYOND SELF-RIGHTEOUSNESS: NEOLIBERALISM, DEMOCRATIC DEFICIT, AND JAVIER MILEI'S GLOBAL LEADERSHIP¹

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From Germany to India, and from Canada to Argentina, the far right is rising. This is expressed not only in electoral victories but also in creative forms of cultural activism. The scholarship on this phenomenon has grown accordingly, which is reflected in innumerable courses, conferences, books, articles, handbooks, and even in the creation of specialized research institutions. Nonetheless, questions surrounding the appeal of the far right remain open. Scholars and commentators usually emphasize what makes it different from other political projects and actors (Abrahamsen and Williams, 2023; Blazak, 2022; Payne, Zulver and Escoffier, 2023). However, a deep understanding of its persuasiveness should also take into account what makes it familiar, close to home, perhaps even comfortable. In other words, considering that we share the same time and space with these movements, political parties and individuals, the question of *what else we share with them* seems in order.

The first section of this article is an intellectual provocation. It challenges the common assumption that the far right is exterior—and, indeed, *far—vis-à-vis* mainstream politics and society. Based on previous work on the politics of knowledge (Ravecca, 2019) and on contemporary attachments to innocence (Ravecca and Dauphinee, 2022), along with the support of critical scholarship from different disciplines, we show that some prominent features of the far right, like racism and patriarchy, are intertwined with the ‘normal’ motions of the state and society. We recognize that engaging with this *problématique* is a demanding task, as it requires both a refusal of premature closures and resistance to anxiety-driven ethical self-curation. We are convinced that

self-righteousness precludes a deep understanding of power, especially regarding the far right.²

Identifying overlapping zones between the mainstream and the far right does not rule out innovation within the latter. Furthermore, we appreciate current scholarship that engages with emerging tendencies and shifts within the right (Eaton, 2014; Stefanoni, 2021; Sanahuja and López Burian, 2022; Arias and Burt, 2024). The second section of this article argues that, to capture these transformations, Global South political experiences (and experiments) should be recognized for their universal analytical value.³ Specifically, we argue that President of Argentina Javier Milei's discourse and leadership are at the forefront of innovations within right-wing politics.

We show that Milei advances the intersectional politics of the far right (Ravecca *et al.*, 2022) in ways that incarnate Kotsko (2018)'s theorization of neoliberalism as a political theology to a point of excruciating perfection. The war against what Milei calls "the caste" plays a key role in this project. We resort to O. Táíwò (2022)'s argument on elite capture to show how the caste narratively mediates between the people and the market. Until now, according to Milei, Argentinians have been trapped in a state-driven socialist nightmare that only serves the elites, so they have not yet exercised true individual freedom. This means they cannot be held accountable for their (bad) financial performance. Thus, the demonization of the caste, the state, and social

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² We are aware that far-right studies offer a nuanced and complex scholarly landscape. Our analysis has some commonalities with, for example, Mudde (2021), and especially with Przeworski (2019). However, our reflexive emphasis on the overlaps between the far right and mainstream socio-political formations offers a distinct hermeneutical alternative that deserves attention.

³ This requires North American and European scholars to not only look, but also *read South* and approach research collaboratively, because—as we will show in our analysis—Global South academic communities have lively discussions *and produce theory* about the right.

justice defers blame and rationalizes neoliberal pain. It remains to be seen how long this political strategy will prove effective.

We believe that shaking self-righteousness by highlighting overlapping zones between the far right and the socio-political mainstream, while turning the gaze toward cutting-edge Global South neoliberal experiences and experiments—in this case, Javier Milei's leadership—is a double move that sharpens the understanding of our contemporary political landscape. The article's conclusion comes back to the idea that no pure exteriority exists between the far right and the rest of us. Even Milei's new rhetoric radicalizes tendencies that were already present in the main corridors of politics and academia.

The far right is close (to mainstream politics and knowledge)

The far right and the liberal global order

- 4 Ravecca (2019) interrogated the politics of political science, arguing that this academic discipline—as any other form of knowledge—is political and that, in Latin America, its dominant expressions have severely restricted democratic imagination. His main argument highlights the need for disciplinary introspection. More recently, he and Elizabeth Dauphinee also studied what they call “contemporary attachments to innocence” and how progressive politics and critical scholarship are, to an extent, shaped by the need for moral capital accumulation and neoliberal self-branding (Ravecca and Dauphinee, 2022). In the current academic landscape, the argument goes, the pain inflicted by oppression and the display of moral goodness become a commodity. After all, people sell whatever they can to survive nowadays. This article brings together the politics of knowledge and attachments to innocence—along with the introspective sensibility these approaches embody—to critically engage with the emerging academic industry of far-right studies.

In our view, *any*—explicit or implicit—logic that divides the world between good and evil is unhelpful. This observation does not exclude narratives that oppose liberals, feminists, anti-racists, and critical scholars to fascists, white nationalists, conspiracy theorists, and ‘crazy people.’ This type of ontologizing politics (Kennel, 2023; Buck-Morss, 2009), frequent in the media but not absent within academic spaces, borders the authoritarianism it is supposed to reject. In other words, if the far right remains too far, such distance shields the rest of us from critique, undermining analytical, political and existential possibilities.

Scholarly characterizations tend to situate the far right as the radical other of liberalism and the liberal order (Anievas and Saull, 2022). After all, human dignity, autonomy, freedom, and so on are intrinsically liberal values; or such is the liberal tale. However, from a political theory or social science perspective, unpacking an ideology and taking its self-portrait for granted are incompatible operations. As Domenico Losurdo showed in *Liberalism: A Counter-History*, racism, colonialism and the rejection of democracy have been part of the inner motions of liberalism throughout its history, notwithstanding its complexity, nuanced landscape and internal mobility (Losurdo, 2011; Marwah, 2019). For example, the philosopher John Stuart Mill is often framed as particularly progressive or ‘advanced’ for his time, given his positions on women’s rights (Burgess-Jackson, 1995; Donner, 1993). Yet, in *On Liberty*, he argued that “Despotism is a legitimate mode of government in dealing with barbarians, provided the end be their improvement, and the means justified by actually effecting that end” (Mill, 1859/2001, p. 14). Despite Mill’s sort of well-intentioned racism (!), it has been widely documented by testimony and scholarship that, far from being a school for democracy, plunder, exploitation and extreme physical and epistemic violence played a role in most, if not all experiences of

colonialism (Achebe, 1958/2012; Mbembe, 2016; Fanon, 1963; Spivak, 2019; Quijano, 2014).

Aimé Césaire (1972/2000) masterfully captured the naturalization of the violence against those deemed inferior. His observations are both accurate and devastating. According to him, what the Christian bourgeois cannot forgive Hitler for is not the crime against humanity. “It is the crime against the white man, the humiliation of the white man, and the fact that (Nazism) applied to Europe colonialist procedures” (1972/2000, p. 36) until then reserved exclusively for Stuart Mill’s “barbarians.” Dabashi (2024) recently resorted to Césaire’s elaboration to challenge Jürgen Habermas’ reaction to the genocide of the Palestinian people currently perpetrated by Israel, where a critical analysis can easily find connections between far-right politics, the liberal establishment, colonial oppression, academia, mainstream media, and even critical theory. Geopolitics seems to frequently unite liberal orders to forces or features that we can appropriately name with the term far right, sometimes in cases of colonialism and occupation; sometimes against the left (Ake, 1979; Bello, 2008; Anievas and Saull, 2022; Kwak, 2020; McNally, 2011; Said, 2003; Ravecca, 2019).

The stigmatization and othering of fascism and Nazism after World War II work against the identification of these continuities between the political mainstream and the far right. Thus, even though these connections are there to be recognized and are usually obvious, they seem trapped in a continuous cycle of erasure. This difficulty is manifested within scholarship and academic settings (Ravecca, 2019). For example, in Canadian political science conferences or seminars, the audience at panels on Canadian democracy, political parties and the like hear a conversation almost completely disconnected from the one heard at panels on Indigenous experiences of the Canadian state. The latter include horror, abuse, and (ongoing) genocide. Somehow,

this conversation does not affect the conventional academic portrayal of Canadian democracy (Kwak, 2020). The fantasy of (settler) innocence seems to resist all evidence and has not been dispelled (Allard-Tremblay, 2024). There is an art of deflection at work, of unseeing what was just revealed. However, a foreign ethnographic gaze finds it puzzling that the words “genocide” and “democracy” occur at the same time, meters apart and about the same regime. *Where* and *who* is the ‘far right’ then? And what would it mean to develop a decolonial or postcolonial critique of far-right studies?

The state, democracy and the far right

To what extent are the formation and motions of the modern state connected to forces contemporarily captured by the far-right label? According to Anievas and Saull (2022), “discretely conceived nation-states not only form the ontological grounding for much IR theorizing but also the ‘organic’ basis for far-right ideologies and politics” (2022, p. 720). This convergence between IR ontology, the state, and the far right is both interesting and disturbing. But it should not come as a surprise, considering that, as these and other authors argue, borders bring about the spatial fortress of the right-wing racial imaginary, providing protection from a variety of racialized international threats like immigrants, criminals or terrorists.

As revealed by both the recurrent images of boats sinking in the Mediterranean Sea and the unspeakable hardships faced by those crossing the Mexican-US border, border anxiety and patrolling of the self, as well as their lethal consequences, are far from being monopolized by the far right. Human tragedy has not disrupted governments’ emphasis on policing (Campesi, 2018). However, the rhetorical containment of colonialism and its meaning as something of the past and that, like imperialism, does not count as internal affairs anyway, along with the aforementioned

othering of fascism upon which Cold War liberalism was founded, help sustain the assumption that the far right is an abnormality. Thus, pervasive 'free-world' narratives erase the very concrete ways in which foreign intervention fostered far-right forces from Uruguay to Guatemala; in the case of the latter—to continue with the theme of borders—producing the emigration waves the US government, regardless of the political party in charge, pledges to contain (North, 2021; Broquetas, 2014; Lessa, 2022).

Similarly, the defense of gender hierarchy is listed as one of its main features, but clearly, the far right does not own patriarchy (Grant and MacDonald, 2020). Brulé (2023) shows that against

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[...] the dominant, optimistic accounts in political science and economics of liberal democratic states as thriving upon and generating ever more egalitarian orders, new global analysis of early social and political orders [...] corroborates feminist theory [...] of the modern state as harnessing women's subordination to build enduring patrilineal orders that ensure men's control over women (2023, p. 47).

In other words, gender inequality was formalized and crystallized by modern states. Brulé's observation opens at least two areas of interrogation: Why have political science and economics insisted on their excessive 'feminist' optimism in the reading of the modern state for so long? And to what extent is the protection of gendered hierarchy by the far right safeguarding the (patriarchal) integrity of the state itself?

Given that patriarchy is a key dimension of inegalitarian orders and plays a crucial role in far-right discourse and identity, the fact that mainstream political science has made this form of power invisible warrants critical interrogation (Cattapan *et al.*, 2024). This is typically done by regarding the family as private, apolitical, or prepolitical, and as a sacred

domain of social relationships that must be protected from the state (currently, this is one of the most powerful arguments of anti-gender activists and organizations from Brazil to Canada) (Biroli and Caminotti, 2020; Rousseau, 2020).⁴ An important segment of the discipline keeps working to make the gender dimension of political structures siloed at best, actively ignoring that the state constantly intervenes to structure the family (MacDonald and Dobrowolski, 2020). A similar observation applies to racism (Blatt, 2018).

The patriarchal state described by Brulé (2023) is the same Césaire (1972/2000) accuses of colonial and racist genocide. In this context, Belew (2018)'s finding that protecting white women is a primal American story becomes unsurprising. According to her analysis, the racist "defense" of white women translated into their policing: their wombs became battlegrounds for the regulation of democratic citizenship and nationalism. Thus, we can understand the effectiveness of the male white supremacy activists' invocations of endangered white women in the 1987 trial against them for seditious conspiracy. These were crucial rhetorical tools to consolidate white power activism and appeal to mainstream institutional and social actors, including the media. In fact, Belew (2018)'s historical analysis implicitly challenges widespread assumptions that portray mainstream media's fact-checking and 'objective' reporting as safeguards for democracy and antidotes against the spread of far-right 'populism.' Bringing in Global South conversations is helpful here: in the Latin American intellectual milieu, the notion that the media is not politically innocent is common sense, perhaps because its naturalization of imperialism is an

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⁴ Ravecca has empirically reconfirmed this argument within the Canadian context with his ongoing major research project on *Countering anti-2SLGBTQ+ Misinformation in Rural Canada: Investigating How Older Canadians Interact with the SOGI Movement in Alberta, British Columbia, and Nova Scotia*, developed in collaboration with Amy Mack, Mariel Cooksey and Luc Cousineau. This research has been funded by the Digital Citizenship Contribution Program through the Ministry of Canadian Heritage.

everyday occurrence and the participation of TV channels and powerful newspapers in coups, for example, has been overt (van Dijk, 2017).

Our interpretive insight around the intertwinement between the far right and mainstream politics, academia, and media travels well, unfortunately. For example, in the context of her research on third-millennium fascism in Italy and the movement CasaPound, Cammelli (2017) shows that they are not isolated or groupuscular phenomena, as it is usually assumed, but a political formation compatible with the democratic arena. Cases like this might reveal that modern liberal democracy is tied to the inequalitarian dimensions of social orderings. This is an important point because it suggests that, instead of a battle between democracy and authoritarianism, what we are witnessing amidst the global rise of the far right is *a dispute over democracy and its meaning*. Cammelli (2017) points to the central role of music and other cultural activities, unpacks the consolidation of a sort of fascist social capital,⁵ and—especially relevant here—highlights that

⁵ The discussion about *how* to study the far right is interesting. Teitelbaum (2019) discusses his case for an immoral anthropology with others. His piece and the responses revolve around the implications and meaning of doing ethnography of the far right. Teitelbaum argues that his friendship and, in some cases, alignment with far-right activists emanated from what he calls “ethnography’s tortured human drama.” In his view, the cost of doing ethnography of the far right is immorality. In his response to Scheper-Hughes’ harsh accusation of feeding extremism, the author says that she seems not to afford any gray space between virtue and vice. Without denying the disciplinary specificity of this exchange, we think the inability to deal with gray areas is, to a great extent, due to attachments to innocence (Ravecca and Dauphinee, 2022), which reify both the far right and the mainstream, fictionalizing a pure exteriority that misses the relationality of power and politics. Paradoxically, the whole exchange, including Teitelbaum’s perspective, takes the radical otherness of the far right for granted. Would doing an ethnography of a regular military force be that different? Only if academic research simply follows the so-called rule of law instead of critically analyzing it. In any case, the othering of the far right should become part of the object of investigation. It belongs to the problem, not to its answer. Once a critical framework is mobilized to produce an integrating gaze that connects all these levels and scenarios, we find that the knowledge and power formation from which the far right emerges involves the mainstream to the core.

her findings lead to questioning fascism's proximity to conventional values. The study also shows the current benevolence of the press around fascist violence in Italy.

Neoliberalism and the far right

In their account of the 2023 'National Conservatism' conference that took place in London, Abrahamsen and Williams (2023) claim that "in common with populists of all stripes, the Radical Right draws a strong opposition between the elite and the people" (p. 29). Hence, for populists, "the loss of working-class jobs, the erasure of national traditions, and the erosion of sovereignty are no longer the result of inevitable, faceless processes of economic integration" (p. 30). Instead, populists blame global elites.⁶ The claim or premise that the loss of working-class jobs is inevitable and not human-made is arguable, to say the least. What are the implications of analyses such as this, which seem to separate the economy from politics starkly?

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The notion of faceless inevitability employed by the authors is particularly telling. Reading everything outside the (neo-)liberal mainstream as a landfill of irrationality dramatically narrows political conversations. As Adam Kotsko (2018) argues, this logic questions the meaningfulness of electoral democracy. Under this framework, democracy cannot (and should not) decide over those relationships that structure social life. In this context of democratic powerlessness, the far right re-politicizes public discourse by blaming the elites, but—as seen with Donald Trump, Jair Bolsonaro,

⁶ The ways in which the category of populism started circulating after Donald Trump in North America, both in public discourse and in academic settings, usually bypass or only do lip service to important scholarship such as the *oeuvre* of Ernesto Laclau and others who worked on the topic for decades (González Scandizzi, 2024). Furthermore, the complaint about populism moralizes through technocratic or scholarly language and gives the monopoly of reason to the liberal establishment (Nicolocapoulos, 2008). However, as O. Táíwò (2022) argues, elites *are* an obstacle to meaningful equality, and concentration of wealth and power *is* undermining democracy.

and Javier Milei—far from dismantling neoliberalism, it embraces the inequality that the latter produces. Therefore, the issue is not that these leaders include elites in the conversation, but how they do so and how they define them. For this reason, Kotsko (2018) argues that the far right can be understood as a heretical variation on neoliberalism rather than as a comprehensive break with it. According to his analysis, the far-right reaction embraces the neoliberal conception of sources of legitimacy.

Belew (2018)'s analysis of white power illuminates the racist and patriarchal nature of the neoliberal turn in the United States of the 1970s and 1980s. In fact:

[...] those who supported school segregation, restrictions on welfare and public housing, tough-on-crime policing, and mandatory sterilization as well as those who opposed immigration and overpopulation, all justified their positions by invoking the hyper-fertile bodies of nonwhite women (2018, p. 164).

The so-called “welfare queen” is a racialized and classed subject that is the object of—in our own vocabulary—an intersectional operation of neoliberal and neoconservative demonization. In other words, this figure became a point of convergence for different forms of inequalitarian politics. The reduction of state services potentiates class and race inequality and control over women, including white women. As Kotsko (2018) argues, where the neoliberals wanted to reinforce traditional family structures to provide the foundation for the economic model, the neoconservatives wanted to create a neoliberal economic model to reinforce traditional family structures (2018, p. 111). This collaboration places neoliberalism and the far right closer to each other.

This insight helps to make sense of current libertarian politics for which democracy is not needed in the realm of freedom.⁷

De-centering the Global North in the analysis of global politics is essential, not because of some fixation on postcolonial or decolonial vocabularies, but because we can better understand everything that way (Ravecca, Rossello and Seri, forthcoming; Rivera, 2018; Lander, 2000; Slobodian and Plehwe, 2022; Connell and Dados, 2014). This is particularly accurate regarding the entwinements between neoliberalism and the far right (Brown, 2015; Saad-Filho and Johnston, 2005; Harvey, 2005; Moulián, 2009). The first neoliberal experiment took place in Chile, imposed by a dictatorship supported by the United States following a *coup d'état* in 1973 that killed a democratically elected president.

The collaboration between the so-called Chicago Boys, the young Chilean economists trained in the Department of Economics of the University of Chicago, and the dictatorship is well-known (Biglasier, 2001; Camou, 1997; Markoff and Montecinos, 1994; McNally, 2011; Munck, 2005).⁸ Ravecca (2015; 2019) examined another side of this historical experience that has been mostly overlooked: the development of an Authoritarian Political Science during this period. Figure 1 shows Augusto Pinochet receiving as a gift a special

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⁷ In a recent book on the far right in Canada and the United States, Barbara Perry and coauthors argue that right-wing extremists are inherently antiegalitarian, whether the focus is on race, religion, culture or gender (2022, p. 11). This inegalitarian dimension is definitely a feature of the far right. Yet, the absence of class in this list reveals that embracing economic inequality is not considered a sign of extremism. Why is the advocacy for economic inequality excluded from the list of items that can inspire extremism? How is “extremism” delineated, siloed and differentiated from other forms of politics? Kennel (2023) considers “violence” “to be a diagnostic concept that points to boundaries that reflect values and priorities” (2023, p. 161). Given the intimate connection that the far-right studies industry traces between its object of analysis and violence, scholars’ silences and choices reveal a lot about their role in the knowledge-power formation in which they operate (Ravecca, 2019).

⁸ This experience has been registered not only by scholarship but also in documentaries such as Carola Fuentes and Rafael Valdeavellano’s *Chicago Boys*: Icarus Films: Chicago Boys.

issue of a political science journal published by a political science department founded by the dictatorship.⁹ This episode is intimately connected to the theme of thinking about the far right beyond self-righteousness: *the discipline of political science participated in this authoritarian project, sometimes through liberal language* around institutions, electoral systems, stability, and so on. And this is not a Global South deviance. Hauptmann (2023) shows the depth of the complicity of US political science with imperialism and its infliction of harm and death on others. Unfortunately, political theory cannot claim innocence. In fact, this disturbing aspect of American academia unites the fields of political theory and political behaviour. Neoliberalism, political science, and violence play different yet intersecting roles in contemporary global politics.

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Figure 1. Augusto Pinochet (left) at a ceremony at the Institute of Political Science, University of Chile, in 1983



Source: Ravecca (2019, p. 51)

⁹ The study included a systematic and in-depth analysis of all the articles published during the dictatorship by the two main political science journals in Chile, *Política* [Politics] (188 pieces, 1982–1989) and *Revista de Ciencia Política* (RCP) [Journal of Political Science] (122 pieces, 1979–1989), along with other relevant historical records. Additionally, to look at variations during the democratic transition, a larger data set of 487 articles published by *Política* (1982–2012) and 544 articles published by RCP (1979–2012) was considered.

As the first section of this article comes to an end, we want to briefly reiterate its main idea: encapsulating ethnonationalism, racism, sexism, the attachment to hierarchy, violence or even genocide into a self-contained far right is conceptually and historically inaccurate. Mainstream politics and knowledges are deeply implicated in the making of a world of inequality and unfreedom. This is a landscape of messy interconnectedness where self-righteousness is out of place. In other words, the emergence of the far right is a self-portrait.

What is new, then? A contribution to understanding current far-right politics: right-wing intersectionality

Our argument about the overlaps between the far right and mainstream socio-political formations neither implies that they are the same nor that they remain unchanged. Ravecca *et al.* (2022a; 2022b) have proposed the category of right-wing intersectionality to account for significant transformations within the conservative movement in the Americas. The concept helps capture current—and widespread—emphases on culture and the shift towards what far-right influencers and politicians call the “cultural battle” (Márquez and Laje, 2017).

As a social science approach, intersectionality entails acknowledging and exploring the multidimensional character of power and the connections between race, class, gender and other axes of social positioning and inequality (Crenshaw, 1989; Viveros Vigoya, 2015; 2016). The genealogy of this perspective is complex and transnational, as it includes the important work of Global South intellectuals, such as the Brazilian scholar and activist Lélia Gonzalez (Gonzalez, 1988; Rios, 2019). Intersectionality has complexified the critical analysis of society and politics. Furthermore, “studies on intersectionality have an intimate relationship with progressive activisms, and they are not shy about their normative dimensions” (Ravecca *et al.*, 2022b, p. 38).

In our view, however, it is key to recognize that *intersections can be mobilized in different ways*. Currently, there are creative forms of activism that deploy intersections between identities and themes to produce political convergences amongst—in the words of Nicolás Márquez, far-right intellectual and Javier Milei's biographer—"libertarians who understand that there is life since conception, conservatives who understand tradition as being in the service of progress, and nationalists who do not conflate their love for the Motherland with their love for the state" (Goldentul and Saferstein, 2020, p. 120; own translation). In other words, the right-wing version of intersectionality produces positive affect and facilitates collaboration between different right-wing identities while simultaneously attacking feminism, the diversity movement, and the left. Thus, it normatively reverses intersectionality while keeping its coalitional strategy (Ravecca *et al.*, 2022a; 2022b).

16 This framework helps to make sense of emerging forms of reactionary activism where the defense of private property, the resistance against redistributive policies, the promotion of the traditional family, and the assertion of the 'natural' difference between men and women, to name some typical themes, become part of a unified political agenda. Gender ideology is a key construct in this form of politics, as it gathers ideology (the threat of the left) and gender (the threat of feminism) (Ravecca *et al.*, 2022b). From our theoretical perspective, gender ideology is the inverted image of intersectionality: a powerful intersection that stimulates anxieties and intensifies attachments to inequality already present in the mainstream.

In the next section, we analyze Javier Milei's leadership through these lenses, bringing into the conversation Kotkso (2018)'s conceptualization of neoliberalism as a political theology and O. Táiwò (2022)'s notion of elite capture. At all times, we do so by engaging with recent Argentinian and Latin American scholarship.

Javier Milei: right-wing intersectionality, the caste, and sacrificial neoliberalism

Emerging scholarship—mostly Argentinian and Latin American—has significantly advanced in the analysis of Javier Milei.¹⁰ Morresi and Ramos (2023) depict the current Argentinian political landscape as the result of an unprecedented alliance of liberal-conservatives with authoritarian nationalists. As Franco (2024) and Franco and Lvovich (2024) observe, this context has opened the door for a return to repressive practices that resemble those of the authoritarian period. Thus, Milei's government embodies a departure from the *pacto democrático* (democratic pact) that shaped post-dictatorship Argentina. This process includes mainstream political actors: Vommaro (2024, p. 75) highlights the radicalization of the “moderate right,” which has facilitated the “normalization” of the more extreme style and policy proposals of La Libertad Avanza, Milei's party.¹¹

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¹⁰ Given its interpretivist nature, this article does not aim to identify a causal mechanism (Beach and Gejl Kaas, 2020). Milei's rise was shaped by a confluence of social and economic factors. Chief among these was the rise of anti-Kirchnerist discourses (Vommaro, 2024), tied to perceptions of the “failure” of Alberto Fernández's government, which morphed into a broader disillusionment with politics. However, this shift did not displace “populism” or “Kirchnerism” as the primary targets of right-wing contempt. The pandemic further fueled discontent, amplifying criticism of governing authorities. Several controversial events, such as political leaders disregarding public health measures they implemented themselves to contain COVID-19, reinforced perceptions of politicians as a disconnected elite, eroding trust in the state. This distrust was compounded by interpretations of the state's actions—or inactions—as either excessive or insufficient (Ferro and Semán, 2024; Semán, 2023). Additionally, longstanding inflation, economic instability, and uncertainty exacerbated social discontent (Sowter, 2024). These challenges were often framed as state-imposed constraints on personal freedom (Ferro and Semán, 2024). In this climate of social and economic unrest, the rise of ‘digital activism’ and the consolidation of right-wing actors on social media platforms (Saferstein, 2023) allowed these forces to gain visibility and assert their demands in the public sphere. This confluence of factors led to a radicalization of right-wing agendas, an expansion of their social support, an increase in violent actions, and a shift of what is considered acceptable discourse and action (Rebón and Súnico, 2024). Future research could delve more deeply into the historical and structural factors that shaped Milei's emergence.

¹¹ This is a similarity with some European cases (Mudde, 2021).

Recent analyses also highlight how Milei's project fosters neoliberal sensibilities and the hegemony of market values while weaving them with libertarian ideals (Welschinger and Semán, 2023; Semán, 2023; Ferro and Semán, 2024). The latter are aggressively promoted by intellectuals and influencers who engage in a "cultural battle," mostly on social media (Saferstein, 2023; Caggiano, 2024; Ravecca *et al.*, 2022b).

From our perspective, Javier Milei's discourse condenses some of the most outstanding innovations of the contemporary far right, not only in Argentina but also globally, which explains why his voice resonates in different contexts.¹² Among these innovations, we want to highlight his coalitional politics (i.e., right-wing intersectionality). During the presidential campaign, he stated that the immediate goal was to destroy a colossal enemy, the "disgusting zurderío" (left-wing people). This priority defers discussions and conflicts between allies. The following formulation became a motto widely shared on social media: "The enemy is so big, and there is so much to do, that there is no room for divisions. First, we unite against the disgusting left, and later we discuss our differences" (Figure 2). These enemies include not only "the left," but also "political correctness," "progressivism," "communism," "cultural Marxism," and "social justice" (Ferro and Semán, 2024, pp. 87-90). Caggiano (2024) also mentions "the egalitarian global mainstream," "anti-racism," "indigenism," and

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¹² As President, he has been concerned with maintaining his role as an influencer. He participates in massive events such as VOX's #VIVA24 or CPAC (both in its American and Brazilian editions) and smaller ones, like the ceremony to celebrate the decoration he received from the Liberal Institute in the Czech Republic. Milei and his allies are also extremely active online. To conduct this critical theory-driven, interpretive study (Carver, 2020; Ravecca, 2019), we analyzed over ten hours of Javier Milei's speeches on YouTube, spanning from December 2023 to July 2024. To process this extensive material, we used Atlas.ti for content thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006) to identify recurring patterns in the discourse. Key themes such as "caste," "state," "social justice," "socialism," and "forces of heaven" were analyzed through our theoretical framework. Simultaneously, we examined numerous posts on X and other social media by Milei and his allies during this period. All excerpts from speeches were translated by us.

“feminism” (2024, p. 103). The attack against the latter is articulated through the notion of gender ideology, which has a central role in the forging of contemporary right-wing alliances (Torricella, 2024; Cavallero and Gago, 2020; 2024; Gago, 2019; 2024).

Figure 2. @albamarinamessa. Image uploaded by a follower of Milei on X, supporting his aggressive speech against “el zurderio asqueroso” (“the disgusting left”). The image includes Milei’s face and the phrase: “The enemy is so big, and there is so much to do, that there is no room for divisions. First, we unite against the disgusting left, and later we discuss our differences”



Source: X (2022). Available at: <https://x.com/albamarinamessa/status/1500491024774402053>

Milei’s discourse amalgamates political positions ranging from the rejection of feminism to the defense of private property (Ravecca *et al.*, 2022a). He “inverts the normative and ideological terms associated with the intersectional perspective” (2022a, p. 6), mobilizing intersections between themes, causes and identities to “legitimize the status quo and naturalize mechanisms of oppression” (2022a, p. 2). The organizing force of these intersections is Milei’s libertarian ideology. Hence, his narrative opposes

anti-racism, environmentalism, feminism and the like against individual freedom.¹³

Milei defines himself as the first libertarian president in the history of humanity. He also claims that he is on a divine mission. Thus, the different threads of right-wing intersectionality and its cultural war against the left and feminism become a battle between “the forces of darkness” and “the forces of heaven” that he represents (La Nación, 2023; La Nación, 2024b; Vox España, 2024; Oficina del Presidente, 2024). He frequently uses variations of a passage from the books of Maccabees: “For the victory of battle standeth not in the multitude of an host; but strength cometh from heaven” (King James Bible, 1611/2017, 1Mc 3,19). Thus, Kotsko (2018)’s theorization of neoliberalism as a political theology is incarnated by Milei to a point of excruciating perfection. Unsurprisingly, socialism is ungodly:

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Let us not yield in the face of socialism; let us confront it with greater courage. Naturally, it seems like a titanic task, and it seems that we are few, but we have nothing to fear because victory on the battlefield does not depend on the number of soldiers, but on the forces that come from heaven (Vox España, 2024, 35min30s).

The market is a divine creation and, therefore, perfect. In this conceptual framework, there is no room for epistemic fallibility and uncertainty (Borovinsky, Plot and Slipak, 2024; Plot, 2023; Amat, 2023). Contrary to what neoclassical economics has wrongly assumed, Milei is certain that markets do not

¹³ The following quote exemplifies Milei’s normative inversion of intersectionality: “Do you know what is best for workers? Let them freely enter into contracts with their employers. Do you know what is best for women? Stop treating them as victims in need of special care. [...] Do you know what is best for the planet? Let the market find, as it has always done, the solutions. Do you know how to achieve this? By removing the parasitic state from the people” (Vox España, 2024, 17min43s). For Milei, the market ‘solves’ intersectionality.

know about failures.¹⁴ His promise for the economy's future is to be managed with the "immanent knowledge of the natural laws of the economy" (Borovinsky, Plot and Slipak, 2024, p. 184; own translation). Moreover, God himself is a libertarian! (NUNCAVASAVERLO, 2024).

In this logic, politicians, state workers ("ñoquis"), populists, feminists, and, of course, socialists, distort the natural motions of the market. They deform capitalism and create an immoral caste system. *La casta* (the caste) is a key component of Milei's political discourse (Vommaro, 2024; Caggiano, 2024; Giménez, 2023; Semán, 2024; Solano, Romá and Pavez, 2024). Solano, Romá and Pavez (2024), Caggiano (2024) and Grimson (2024b) explain that the caste operates as a moral category to identify the "culprits" of social unrest and economic chaos while enabling the recognition of the "victims"—i.e., those "humiliated" and stripped of their freedom. The latter discursively emerges as a new collective identity, the "good Argentiniens," defined by their desire and potential for autonomy, merit and freedom.

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Through the narrative on the caste, Milei has been able to capitalize on legitimate concerns about how identity politics, affirmative action, welfare policies and the like are appropriated or distorted by the privileged. For him, however, this elitist capture (O. Táíwò, 2022) is not a pathology but the result of the 'anatomy' of social justice, which is in itself

¹⁴ In Milei's words: "The market is a mechanism of social cooperation where property rights are voluntarily exchanged. Therefore, given this definition, to speak of market failure is an oxymoron. There is no such thing as market failure" (La Nación, 2024a, 12min24s). Furthermore, "under the pretext of a supposed market failure, regulations are introduced, which only generate distortions in the price system that prevent economic calculation and consequently savings, investment and growth" (La Nación, 2024a, 12min05s). The market is a place where neither power nor oppression are possible. Politics contaminates the sacred space of the market: "[...] this idea of the market as a process of social cooperation is a tremendous bombshell against socialism. Because, if exchanges are free, the two parties involved in the exchange win. Therefore, there is no place for the theory of exploitation. There is no place for surplus value. There is no place for Marxism and socialism" (Televisión Pública Noticias, 2024, 15min52s).

violent and criminal (or at least criminogenic).¹⁵ In Milei's vision, the state is the source of elite capture, so dismantling its institutions becomes the neoliberal solution to (in his words) the Marxist problem. In short, the notion of the caste entails an indictment against multiple intersected elites that ultimately serve the forces of darkness.¹⁶

Milei's discourse on freedom is articulated through constant biblical references.¹⁷ At this early stage of his religious-political mission, freedom is an act of violent liberation from the totalitarianism of social justice. The status of violence within this project is particularly interesting. His followers frequently represent him as a lion that protects from *and attacks* evil forces. Furthermore, the image of the chainsaw, widely used during his campaign, evokes harm. It refers to the need for state cuts that, in social media and public discourse, quickly transmute into bloody bodily cuts (Figure 3). After the closure of The National Institute Against Discrimination, Xenophobia and Racism, Milei's followers and trolls inundated X with racist and sexist jokes. In this context, violence is a manifestation of freedom and the path towards it.

¹⁵ In Milei's words: "Social justice is not fair; it does not contribute to the general welfare. Quite the contrary: it is an intrinsically unjust idea because it is violent. It is unjust because the state is financed through taxes, and taxes are collected coercively" (La Nación, 2024a, 5min53s).

¹⁶ The caste works as a synthesis of Milei's definition of the enemy and is overtly intersectional. Milei, like Márquez and Laje (2007), argues that feminism is the new version of socialism and another facet of the caste: "Given the resounding failure of collectivist models and the undeniable advances of the free world, socialists were forced to change their agenda. [...] The first of these new battles was the ridiculous and unnatural fight between men and women. [...] The only thing that this agenda of radical feminism resulted in was greater state intervention to hinder the economic process, giving work to bureaucrats who contributed nothing to society, whether in the form of women's ministries or international organizations dedicated to promoting this agenda" (La Nación, 2024a, 16min10s).

¹⁷ His background is Catholic, but he claims to admire Judaism. His far-right narrative includes constant references to Israel.

Figure 3. @ElTrumpista. Javier Milei wielding a chainsaw with the statement “Viva la Libertad Carajo” (“Long live freedom, damn it,” a phrase he is known for) in front of doors marked with Argentinian public institutions with blood leading out from behind them



Source: X (2024). Available at: <https://x.com/ElTrumpista/status/1764858473815126309>

Freedom hurts. It must. Punishment and suffering are needed. Kotsko (2018) argues that, within neoliberalism, free choice is the raw material from which demons are crafted. People need to be punished for their bad choices. However, in current Argentina, bad outcomes are due to distortions introduced by the caste. There is a strident politics of innocence and victimhood at play here (Ravecca and Dauphinee, 2022) that constantly secures moral boundaries between the “good Argentinians” and the “caste.”¹⁸ This narrative mediates between people and the market, safeguarding the innocence of the former. After all, individuals did not have the opportunity to make genuinely bad choices because

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¹⁸ While he cultivates his own attachments to innocence, Milei attributes a sort of clumsy kindness to those who want to exercise social justice from the state: “But it must be understood that the combination of good intentions and dirigisme leads to the worst of places. The do-gooders think that good results are derived from good intentions and empathy. And they have the hubris of thinking that, by directing the behavior of each member of society, they can coordinate a more efficient joint behavior; they even boast that they can do it optimally. In other words, they see a problem and assume the solution is to throw the state at it, and that is what they call justice” (Oficina del Presidente, 2024, 16min20s).

they have so far lived in the nightmare of social justice and communism.¹⁹ The caste is a device for the deferral of the market's judgment. It offers temporal exculpation for those Argentinians who are exterior to it. Pain, however, cannot be deferred, which feeds into the resentment—and violence—against those populating the caste.

For those who choose the path of freedom, redemption awaits. Milei has announced that, after a very difficult and painful period, Argentina will become a “developed country.” Pain purifies individuals and societies. But, while the caste is to blame for the suffering the population must endure, neoliberalism still demands sacrifice. Figure 4 shows a small business owner surrounded by merchandising. At the moment of the interview, he was closing his establishment because of the economic situation, which became catastrophic after the government implemented its first policies. Yet, he expressed his support for Milei because sacrifice, in his view, is necessary for a brighter future. Thus, as Solano, Romá, and Pavez (2024) point out, Milei manages to establish himself as “the messianic savior” who demands the “sacrifice” of his followers to achieve hopeful “change” (2024, p. 22-27). However, Ipar (2024) claims this use of sacrifice and explicit punishment does not need to be disguised; suffering is in itself a mechanism that legitimizes “the politics of cruelty” and blames the enemies (2024, p. 245-247).

¹⁹ The caste plays a didactic role since it explains to the “good Argentinians” why they are not successful in the market economy, exempts them from blame and tells them who is responsible: “And thanks to the security protocol implemented by Minister Patricia Bullrich, we are also putting an end to the daily extortion that social organizations impose on society every time they block a street. We have always said it: in our government, those who block streets do not get paid. But we have the vocation to protect as much as possible the victims of the impoverishing system we are trying to change. No Argentinian is to blame for the fact that the inoperativeness and greed of politicians have destroyed their income, especially not the most vulnerable” (La Nación, 2024b, 31min42s).

Figure 4. La Nación. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=T6vGrHtxOeU>. ("I cannot do this anymore. I am closing my establishment". Sergio, small business owner). The image includes two journalists and a small business owner crying.



Source: YouTube (2024). Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=T6vGrHtxOeU>

This embrace of pain might seem surprising, but it has been frequent during and after the 2023 Argentinian elections. As we write these lines, there are intense signs of social discontent, and the country's future trajectory is uncertain. What seems intriguing, however, is that Milei's cultural intersectional war was successful in producing support for austerity and self-sacrifice to the point that, in his political rallies, he would scream, "There is no money!" as people cheered.

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Conclusion: Javier Milei and the mainstream

The politics of knowledge that shapes far-right studies, as well as a certain fixation with Donald Trump, produce the relative invisibility of leaders such as Javier Milei, who are otherwise hyper-visible in the political arena. Milei is not a 'little Trump,' as one presentation on "global Trumpism" at the 2024 American Political Science Association Annual Meeting seemed to imply. In fact, Milei's discourse is complex and brings together forms of right-wing intersectionality, a conservative version of the critique against elite capture

and the theological dimension of neoliberalism. His interventions extensively refer to scholarship and debates within economics, as well as statistics and historical experiences. In our view, Milei's perspectives are more multilayered and intellectually ambitious than those of Donald Trump, Jair Bolsonaro and most global right-wing leaders. Thus, Milei is rising as the forerunner of the international far right.

As Guillermina Seri argued in another panel at APSA, Milei seems to be a time-traveller from a future neoliberal dystopia. Admired by Elon Musk, who (quite graphically) compared the pleasure of listening to his speeches with watching pornography, Milei can be categorized as a neoliberal extremist. This circles back to the initial insight of this article: the unspoken intimacies between the far right and the socio-political mainstream. Milei's present-future comes from the past. He reinvigorates and radicalizes anti-egalitarian tendencies, discourses, and forces that are far from new.

26 In an interview with supportive journalist Luis Majul on 19 February 2024,²⁰ after talking about the symbolic implications of the word “dog” in Hebrew (he has an intense connection with his dogs, as well as a rather peculiar relationship with his sister), Milei is asked about the criticism of his emotional instability. This was his answer:

They don't understand the market. I did a long retweet against the caste. It had 7 million impressions. Who cares about what they say?! *Numbers rule* [...]. Seconds later, he adds: I sold a product, people bought it, and I became President (El Peluca Milei, 2024, 7min00s).

Amadae (2016) and others have shown that the logic of game theory has been engulfing and radically reshaping

²⁰ The far right is not a social media phenomenon alone. In the case of Argentina, corporate and mainstream media empowered Javier Milei and naturalized his rhetoric.

political (and human) possibilities for decades. This includes the ways in which an important segment of political science engages with democracy and party politics: as a market, as a strategy game. Hence, the far right is just another player. Furthermore, in contemporary electoral politics, to defeat the far right, its opponents seem to be required to use the same spectacularized, shallow (populist?) attention-seeking strategies. *Numbers rule* is a powerful expression that has consequences for all areas of human activity and requires further interrogation. Are opponents to the far right offering a radically different political future beyond their stage performances like the 2024 Democratic National Convention? Is democracy becoming a show for passive consumption?²¹

Finally, does political science somehow participate in the making of the conditions for the rise of the far right? Besides the aforementioned normative emptying of politics pushed by mainstream forms of political science (Monroe, 2005), it seems that the stark separation between the political and the economic has obscured power and prevented a conversation about economic justice within democratic discourse (Kotsko, 2018). A democracy that does not decide over the economic dimension of collective life cannot deal with climate change, reduce inequality, or offer any hint of hope. Neoliberalized democracy suffocates its promise and obliterates its meaningfulness. Why are people expected to care about such a poor offer? It seems that democratic austerity, in academia and politics, is not an attractive alternative *vis-à-vis* the far right. The question for the future is whether academics, activists and politicians can make a democratic offer that is worth fighting for.

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²¹ In any case, we can say with certainty that these strategies of hollowing up democracy are not working—we finish this article with the news that Donald Trump is the President-elect of the United States of America. Many observers and analysts believe that the support for Israel's genocide in Gaza and the embrace of billionaires and corporate power, combined with pathetic claims of moral superiority, played a role in the Democrats' defeat.

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READING THE FAR RIGHT BEYOND SELF-RIGHTEOUSNESS: NEOLIBERALISM, DEMOCRATIC DEFICIT, AND JAVIER MILEI'S GLOBAL LEADERSHIP

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Abstract: This article is an invitation to reflect on the far right beyond self-righteousness. The authors challenge the conventional perception of the far right as wholly separate from mainstream politics and society, arguing instead that there is substantial overlap, particularly in terms of patriarchy, racism, and neoliberalism. Nonetheless, the right does innovate and evolve, and it is important to make sense of these shifts. The article's second section argues that some of the most cutting-edge forms of right-wing activism are currently unfolding in the Global South. Argentinian President Javier Milei's leadership is a noteworthy case, as it blends right-wing intersectionality (Ravecca *et al.*, 2022a; 2022b), a conservative version of the critique of elite capture (O. Táíwò, 2022), and the theological dimension of neoliberalism (Kotsko, 2018). The conclusion goes back to the idea that, at multiple significant levels, there is no pure exteriority between the far right and the rest of us. Even Milei's 'new' rhetoric radicalizes tendencies that were already present in the main corridors of politics and academia.

Keywords: critical theory, Javier Milei, neoliberalism, right-wing intersectionality, self-righteousness.

**LENDO A ULTRA-DIREITA ALÉM DA AUTOCOMPLACÊNCIA:
NEOLIBERALISMO, DÉFICIT DEMOCRÁTICO E A LIDERANÇA
GLOBAL DE JAVIER MILEI**

Resumo: Este artigo é um convite para refletir sobre a ultra-direita além da autocomplacência. Os autores desafiam a percepção

convencional da ultra-direita como algo completamente separado da política e da sociedade dominante, argumentando que há uma sobreposição substancial, especialmente em termos de patriarcado, racismo e neoliberalismo. No entanto, a direita inova e evolui, sendo essencial compreender essas mudanças. A segunda seção do artigo argumenta que algumas das formas mais avançadas de ativismo de direita estão atualmente emergindo no Sul Global. A liderança do presidente argentino Javier Milei é um caso notável, pois combina a interseccionalidade de direita (Ravecca et al., 2022a; 2022b), uma versão conservadora da crítica à captura das elites (O. Táíwò, 2022) e a dimensão teológica do neoliberalismo (Kotsko, 2018). A conclusão retorna à ideia de que, em múltiplos níveis significativos, não existe uma exterioridade pura entre a ultra-direita e o restante de nós. Mesmo a “nova” retórica de Milei radicaliza tendências já presentes nos principais corredores da política e da academia.

Palavras-chave: Teoria Crítica, Javier Milei, Neoliberalismo, Interseccionalidade de Direita, Autocomplacência.

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