

The Far-Right and the Construction of the Red Enemy in Latin America

Written by Cairo Junqueira, Livia Milani, Iara Lima and Pablo Guimarães

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The global rise of far-right parties and governments is a transnational phenomenon that impacts domestic politics and global governance (Abrahamsen et al. 2024; Anievas and Saull 2023; Pinheiro-Machado and Vargas-Maia 2023; Sanahuja and Burian 2023). “Far-right” is used here as an umbrella concept to refer both to right-wing movements and parties that contest normative elements of liberalism—ranging, depending on the specific case, from rejection of multiculturalism and cultural plurality to opposition to representative democracy (Mudde 2019; Pirro 2022). Mudde (2019) divides these groups into the radical right, to represent those who run for elections and accept representative democracy, and the extreme-right, to encompass those who contest democracy itself. Presently existing literature identifies their strategies as involving the discursive construction of enemies. Those are identified in globalized managerial elites and their perceived national allies – especially immigrants, but also other historically marginalized groups, such as Black and LGBTQIA+ populations (Abrahamsen et al. 2024; Anievas and Saull 2023). In many cases, a nativist discourse is constructed, in which elites and immigrants are read as anti-national (Mudde 2019).

However, this diagnosis derives primarily from case studies from the Global North. Do cases relating to the Global South diverge from or confirm the same perspectives outlined above? What new insights does Latin America bring in the establishment of enemies by the far-right? In this text, we seek to throw light on the specificities of the discursive formation in Latin America, arguing that the discursive construction in the region centres on identifying left-leaning politics as the primary opponent, rather than the managerial global elites. The red enemy appears here as a singular research finding to explain the particularities of the far right in the region, distinguishing itself from examples in the Global North. In this vein, the text shows empirically how far right leaders construct discursive equivalences that make collective action possible in spite of national specificities. The analysis is conducted through two case studies: i) the Madrid Forum, with an analysis of documentation produced by the institution, and ii) the Brazilian editions of the Conservative Political Action Conference (CPAC), with an exploratory analysis based on journalistic accounts of such events.

The far-right and the construction of the enemy

The academic discussion on the global emergence of the far-right points to their populist discourse as a common facet. Populism is understood as a political strategy based on the discursive construction of a “people”— articulated as homogeneous and pure — in contrast to the elites — presented as corrupt. The narrative structure constructs a dyad of “us *versus* them”, proposes a discursive connection between the leader and its electoral base, and seeks “national regeneration”. Based on this narrative, and by building transnational forums, far-right groups foster the idea of unity on a global scale. While building global connections, the expressions of the far right are also plural and localized. In this context, the existence of “discursive equivalences” allows for their mobilization and collective action on a global scale. In the words of Abrahamsen et al (2024, 20):

[...] the contemporary Right has succeeded in developing an opposition between a global managerial elite and diverse ‘people’ in multiple geographical locations. This takes many forms, but it is a key discursive structure that anchors the construction and mobilisation of the radical Right across diverse contexts.

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The authors view radical right actions as seeking to form provisional transnational alliances between heterogeneous groups that, in common, identify an enemy in the globalized and “anti-national” elites. In their view, far-right narratives are not univocal, but rather find equivalences for global convergences, through which they perform unity and a shared critique of the international order (Abrahamsen et al. 2024). From this, they identify connections between groups and governments in the Global North and South, forged in opposition to a supposed Western universalism and the defense of an international order permeated by multipolarity and grand civilizations. Thus, they seek to create global alliances with the aim not only of weakening international liberalism but also of replacing it with a common sense based on national and local “traditions” (Abrahamsen et al. 2024).

Similarly, Anievas and Saull (2022) point out how criticism of global governance is constitutive of these rights, as well as the construction of a securitizing rhetoric that presents the Other, the foreigner, as an enemy. In the view of these authors, “Enemy Others can take a variety of forms from ethnic, religious, and racial minorities to liberal ‘globalist’ elites, socialists and communists” (Anievas and Saull 2022, 3). However, they also argue that the contemporary far-right narrative is constituted from the contestation of the international, opposing cosmopolitanism, “immigrants or transnational corporations – that are seen as encroaching upon and corrupting the national economy, along with its’ suspicion of international organizations ‘governing’ the world economy” (Anievas and Saull 2022, 4). Nevertheless, understanding the specificities of the far-right in the Global South is essential for a better understanding of the phenomenon, since they reflect into their political action and conception of global governance. In these countries, the far-right emerged in a context marked by recent economic growth and coexists with important legacies of the authoritarianisms that predominated throughout the 20th century (Pinheiro-Machado, Vargas-Maia, 2023). The causes – as the consequences – of their surge in the Global South may be different than what occurs in the Global North.

In Latin America, as highlighted by Sanahuja, Nilson, and Burian (2024), the far-right came to power after a period of progressive and left-wing policies, commonly defined as the “pink wave”. The progressive cycle was heterogeneous, combining both center-left and moderate-left governments and regimes that challenged capitalism and downplayed liberal democracy. The contemporary right-wing narrative involves both contesting the political phenomenon of the “pink wave” and seeking alliances permeated by a certain degree of subordination with groups from the Global North. Therefore, in Latin America, far-right narrative constructs in opposition to left-leaning politics, labeling as “cultural marxism” issues relating to diversity and inclusion policies, especially feminism and anti-racism. Based on a specific narrative, they create subordinated connections with Global North movements in the defense of “traditional values”. Considering this context, unlike other places, the Latin American far-right – in constant dialogue with their European and US counterparts and understanding themselves as part of the same group – elect communism and the left as their main enemies. Notwithstanding discursive differences, they generate equivalences by opposing progressive and inclusive change. Diversity and inclusion policies are labeled as “left-leaning”, “Marxism” – while in the Global North they are mostly represented as part of a global governance driven by technocrat elites.

Constructing enemies from Madrid

The *Madrid Foro* describes itself as a transnational alliance that welcomes all people who share the ideals of freedom, democracy, and the rule of law (Madrid Forum 2022b). The Forum was founded under the leadership of the Spanish party Vox, which is today the third-largest political force in Spain and a leading actor in the transnational networks of the global right (Boado and Mellón 2024). Its rhetoric draws on defending freedom, democracy, and anti-communism (Goldstein 2022). The Forum constructs itself in articulation with Latin American political leaders, who contribute and have protagonist expression at the initiative, framing together its narrative. The Forum’s documentation presents the diagnosis of authoritarian left-wing regimes in Cuba, Venezuela, and Nicaragua systematically curtailing the freedoms of Latin American people, degenerating democratic institutions, and breaking the rule of law (Madrid Forum 2022b). Furthermore, the Forum’s declarations identify a negligence in forceful responses to the aforementioned dictatorships, including lack of significant political consequences for their leaders (Madrid Forum 2022b). The Forum goes further, positioning those regimes as enemies and constructing the narrative of left-wing governments as intrinsically authoritarian.

In several documents produced by the institution, antagonism toward left-wing governments – or communist ones,

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since they are used interchangeably – is evident. The Madrid Charter, the Forum's founding document, warns of how the São Paulo Forum and the Puebla Group – transnational organizations that reunite left-leaning parties, academics and political leadership from Latin America – infiltrate centers of power to impose their ideological agenda – that is, “communism” (Madrid Forum 2022a). The document also states that “the advance of communism poses a serious threat to the prosperity and development of our nations, as well as to the freedoms and rights of our compatriots” (Madrid Forum 2022a, translated). Madrid Forum's rhetoric is characterized by the argument of communism as an evil, an impediment to the prosperity and development of Latin American nations, in addition to impeding freedom and blocking citizens' rights. Therefore, one of the main objectives of the Madrid Forum is to combat communism and to “promote freedom”.

The attacks on left-wing governments are also present in other documents. The “Bogotá Declaration,” a document resulting from the Forum's first regional meeting, associates the Latin American left with organized crime and the international criminal mafia, for example.

That communism has been organized in spaces such as the Forum of São Paulo and more recently on the Grupo de Puebla, which has been able to undermine for decades the liberal democracies of the region, and that it also maintains close links with the international criminal mafias, among them, the FARC and the Cartel of the Soles (Madrid Forum 2022c, translated).

Furthermore, the narrative intensifies in the “Lima Declaration,” a document resulting from the 2nd Regional Meeting held by the Madrid Forum. In this declaration, the organization directly attacks left-wing governments, claiming that their leaders are incapable of governing well and solving the problems of the Latin American population. This can be seen in the following excerpt:

[...] The radical left does not have a guaranteed triumph, firstly, because it is incapable of governing well and, therefore, does not resolve the pressing problems of the population; secondly, because it is increasingly identified with the worst ties of humanity – as is the case with totalitarianism, organized crime and the destruction of the values of western civilization [...] (Foro de Madrid 2023a, translated).

These plain rhetoric position the left as a complete antagonist of the Madrid Forum. Communism, consequently, is an ideology widely rejected by this organization, which presents itself as a defender of freedom in Latin America and against left-wing dictatorships. The focal point of their narrative, such as the emphasis on the Venezuela case and on rhetoric about freedom, are issues shared by far-right leaders from Latin America, Spain and the United States. Therefore, these ideas promoted by the Madrid Forum are intended to reinforce the ideological power of the right in Latin America, as well as contribute to the development of the global network of influence developed by the Vox Party.

Organizing the Brazilian Right from Washington

The Conservative Political Action Conference (CPAC) reunites leading conservative forces of the United States (US) since its creation, in 1974, seeking to align and rationalize far-right politics. Starting from 2017, Matt Schlapp, one of the leading forces behind Donald Trump's political ascension, began to implement CPAC editions in other countries – such as Japan, Hungary, South Korea, Brazil, Mexico and Argentina, leading to these countries import of agendas from the US right (Magalhães and Caldeira Neto 2025; Barbosa 2024). Local political elites engaged in the initiatives as a form of gaining political expression in an international sphere. The first CPAC Brazil took place in São Paulo and aimed to foster a national conservative identity and align the national conservative thought (Gortázar 2019; Burgos 2019; Ferreira 2019; Foro 2019).

To achieve these objectives, the local far right leadership primarily resorted to attacking the left and its variants – for example, communism, socialism, and Marxism. This hatred is evident in the speeches of the event's speakers. Then Former Brazilian Minister of the Family and Human Rights, Damara Alves, warned that “socialists will return” if there is no organization on the part of the right, describing the left as “playing dirty” and “alive and mobiling” (Burgos 2019). It is noteworthy that Alves is a leading figure in defending “traditional values” in Brazil. She starkly opposes

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laws regarding abortion rights and defends a heteronormative concept of family. In addition, Eduardo Bolsonaro criticized the “authoritarianism of political correctness” claiming that this is a left-wing *modus operandi*. (“Political correctness” is a term largely used by far-right leaders to express discontent with diversity and inclusion policies.)

The second CPAC in Brazil was held in Brasília on September 3 and 4, 2021. Freedom, unity, and the organization of the far right were the main themes guiding the event, once again instrumentalizing attacks on the left to justify them. In his speech, Nikolas Ferreira, who would become a Brazilian Congressman in 2023, emphasized the need to “reoccupy the spaces that the left has occupied”, stating that CPAC breaks the “spiral of silence” imposed by the left – again using shared language used to oppose diversity and inclusion policies. Furthermore, Zoe Martínez, a Cuban dissident, criticized the lack of freedom in Cuba, associated with the communist regime, emphasizing that “without freedom there is no life” (Oliva 2021; Desideri 2021). The third edition of CPAC took place in Campinas on June 11 and 12, 2022 to discuss the elections in Brazil. There were also attacks to the Supreme Federal Court (STF) and the Superior Electoral Court (TSE) (Caetano 2022; Críticas 2022; Munhoz 2022). José Antonio Kast, an important politician from Chile, stated that the left-leaning forces generate instability in Chile and spread it to neighboring nations. The fourth edition took place in Belo Horizonte, Brazil on October 23 and 24 of 2023, observing the main themes were the unity of the Brazilian far-right and the 2024 municipal elections. During his speech, Jair Bolsonaro addressed the need to pay attention to the 2024 municipal elections. Special attention was given to the candidacy of the left-leaning Congressmen and activist Guilherme Boulos in São Paulo, to which Bolsonaro referred as a “problem” (Weteman 2023; Marzullo 2023; Augusto 2023).

The fifth CPAC was held in the Santa Catarina city of Balneário Camboriú, on July 6 and 7, 2024. Bolsonaro was framed as the main leader of the Brazilian right, and the main themes of discussion were the municipal elections, freedom of expression, and the left in Latin America. Javier Milei, Argentinean president, stated that Bolsonaro suffered “police persecution” and criticized “socialist governments” that violate freedom, citing Cuba, Nicaragua, and Venezuela as “bloodthirsty dictatorships” and implying that President Lula was “corrupt” and “communist” (Freitas 2024; Carlucci 2024; Zanini 2024). Again, Venezuela and Cuba appear as focal points in the narrative, as well as a language of freedom and individual liberties. Thus, the CPAC meetings in Brazil focused not only on criticism, but also on attacking the left, which is not seen as an adversary, but rather as an enemy to be confronted and eliminated. Through opposition to the left, they construct narrative equivalence with other far-right groups, including the defense of “traditional values”, selective defense of certain individual liberties and regime change in Venezuela and Cuba.

Final Remarks

Combating the “evil left” is constitutive of far-right politics and is globally present in their articulations. Nevertheless, the theme is central to the Latin American far-right, where it is on the light spot. The emphasis given to this theme differentiates the Latin American far-right to their counterparts elsewhere, in Europe and the United States, where migration and opposition to liberal, managerial elites is on the forefront. This reflects the context in which such political forces came to power in Latin America, following a decade of progressive politics, commonly referred to as the “pink wave”.

While Latin American far-right leaders do not oppose the construction of world order based on grand civilizations, they define themselves as Western and proclaim values such as freedom and democracy. Those values are seen as intrinsic to the West and saving them from corruption by left-leaning forces is a central aspect of their narrative. It also means accepting US and European hegemony – as long as promoted by right-wing political leadership. Therefore, to engage Latin American leaders, narrative equivalences permeate a critique of global order that presents it as dominated by left-leaning, progressive worldviews. In the construction of “narrative equivalences” in the Global South, the discourse is changed to respond to national and regional contexts.

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