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Looking North from the South: Images of Donald Trump in the Speeches of Bolsonaro and Milei

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Jorge Chaloub

ABSTRACT

This article examines the recent trajectory and future prospects of the South American far right through the lens of representations of Donald Trump in the speeches of Jair Bolsonaro and Javier Milei. Their pronouncements allow for a comparison of distinct perspectives within this heterogeneous field. The two leaders differ in relevant respects, holding different ideas about the economy and the nation that translate into divergent foreign policies.

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Jorge Chaloub is an Associate Professor of Political Science at the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro (UFRJ), Brazil, and a research fellow of Brazil's National Council for Scientific and Technological Development (CNPq) and the Rio de Janeiro State Research Foundation (FAPERJ). He holds a PhD in Political Science from the Rio de Janeiro State University (IESP-UERJ), with a doctoral research stay at the École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales (EHESS) in Paris. His research focuses on Latin American political thought and the contemporary far right.

Introduction

The United States has always been a central actor in South American politics, not only through its explicit interventions, by means of the economy and occasional military threats, but also through a strong presence in the political imagination of elites. Whether as a model to be followed or an enemy to be fought, the US is an unavoidable actor in the politics of the most diverse nations in the region.

The conjunction between successive electoral victories of the far right across the subcontinent and the consolidation of Donald Trump's leadership in the United States establishes an unusual scenario. Presidents of the largest countries in the region are claiming direct inspiration from the North American president and openly assuming a subordinate role before a foreign country. In politics, what is said matters. Investigating this topic is a way to better understand common aspects of the South American far right, its cleavages, and its internal dissensions. Due to national contexts and to the differences between the figures involved, there are important variations in the most frequent images of the same character.

This article deals with the recent trajectory and future prospects of the South American far right through the lens of representations of Donald Trump. To this end, we analyze the images of Trump in the speeches of Jair Bolsonaro and Javier Milei. The pronouncements of the Argentine president and the Brazilian former president allow for a comparison of distinct perspectives within the heterogeneous field of the South American far right. The aforementioned leaders diverge in relevant respects, bringing different ideas about the economy, the nation, and the role of the military in the sub-region, which produces diverse geopolitical imaginaries.

Trump at times appears in the speeches as a leader with almost religious traits, capable of recovering a lost tradition of the West; at other moments he emerges as a defender of capitalism, capable of rebuilding a market order threatened by its enemies; while finally he appears in a heroic guise, as a sheriff capable of cleansing the world of

criminals through law and order policies. To understand the paths of South American politics in the coming years, it is fundamental to better grasp the disputes surrounding geopolitical imaginaries.

As inspiration for this work, we draw on studies that analyze the social construction of charismatic leadership, frequently defined through the concept of populism. This field contains an extensive literature that examines the images of such leaders (Mendonça and Caetano 2021; Casullo and Colalongo 2022; Moffitt 2016).

Two Characters and Two Countries

Jair Bolsonaro and Javier Milei are frequently read in a similar key, as representatives of the South American far right that, over the last decade, not only won elections but reorganized the way political disputes and public debate unfolded across the subcontinent. Amid their similarities, it is necessary, however, to highlight important differences. They construct diverse political identities and differ in relevant aspects of their most frequent performances.

Bolsonaro, the first of the two to emerge victorious from a presidential election, always emphasized his ties to the Armed Forces as the center of his public image. In his rapid trajectory from a low-profile congressman to a national leader, he made effective use of social media and broadened his conservative repertoire, while always maintaining the image of a former military man, averse to the excesses of formalism or to the discourses of intellectuals. During his first presidential campaign, Bolsonaro declared without great embarrassment his complete ignorance of economics, for example, whose decisions would be the exclusive responsibility of the Minister of Economy, Paulo Guedes.

Bolsonaro emphasized his military past to claim the heroic traits necessary to save Brazil from the evils and enemies of the present. The former Brazilian president cultivated, in this sense, a certain traditional idea of masculinity, which defined the true man according to moral and physical criteria. Bolsonaro, at the same time, always made abundant use of a popular image, distinct from the more usual formalities of the Presidency, see his live streams in which he wore fake football club shirts and flip-flops (Villas-Boas 2022).

Milei's ascent to power was strikingly rapid. The Argentine president always claimed the role of intellectual. Whether in his electoral campaign or in his autobiographical accounts (Milei 2022), he assumes the identity of an economic genius, capable of demonstrating, from a superior knowledge of the field, the errors not only of the left, but also of neoclassical authors.

If he, on the one hand, also asserts a certain violent masculinity – as in his use of the chainsaw and public shouting – such an image is always combined with praise for the intellectual gifts of the Argentine president. Furthermore, Milei never assumed the traditional image of the man tied to family and children, but frequently cultivated, even as a mark of his exceptionality as an individual an eccentric demeanor, incompatible with traditional or widely accepted social standards. Thinking about his relationship with the popular sectors, he also did not mobilize the same type of discourse as Bolsonaro, even though, in his autobiography, Milei highlights moments of economic hardship and an ability to rise socially through his own merits.

Both presidents assert a clear alignment not only with the United States, but with Donald Trump himself. Both can be contrasted with another recently elected far right President, Jose Antonio Kast of Chile. Even though Kast's time at the helm of power is still limited, it is noteworthy how he, another far-right leader in the subcontinent, indicates a diplomatic alignment with the North Americans, but does not express the same admiration and public submission to Trump. Bolsonaro and Milei superimpose political and moral affinities onto a certain personal closeness, which emerges through the grandiloquent representation of the President of the United States.

Still, Bolsonaro and Milei are not carbon copies of one another. While both claim the position of a great leader of the West with the role of successful businessman – there are important inflections in the ways each represents Trump in their speeches. These various representations suggest their diverse trajectories and identities, and the state of the far right in Brazil and Argentina.

Bolsonarismo, Right-Wing Christianity and Trumpism

In 2017, an unknown Brazilian diplomat published an article entitled "Trump e o Ocidente" ("Trump and the West"). Ernesto Araújo was close to networks of the Brazilian far right and strongly influenced by Olavo de Carvalho, the most influential Brazilian intellectual of the field. The text had a strong impact on his career and was decisive for his appointment as Minister of Foreign Affairs in the Jair Bolsonaro administration.

The article features Trump as a leader capable of recovering 'the symbolic past, the history and culture of Western nations' (Araújo 2017, 1), with 'roots in a long intellectual and sentimental tradition, ranging from Aeschylus to Oswald Spengler' (Araújo 2017, p. 1). The leadership of the North American president would be above all a religious matter: "At its center lies not an economic and political doctrine, but the longing for God, the God who acts in history" (Araújo 2017, 1).

Araújo presents Trump as a leader engaged in the spiritual defense of the West. To place Trump on this pedestal, Ernesto Araújo draws on a concept of the West defined in

conservative or even reactionary terms, conceived as a tradition of 25 to 30 centuries, rooted in Greece and strengthened by Catholicism. It is a 'spiritual' and 'organic' entity – more than a geopolitical concept – which finds itself in frank decline and facing a clear threat of extinction. Beset by internal and external enemies, the West risks dying. Trump would be the hero capable of rescuing what has been lost and keeping this curious terminal patient alive. This portrayal echoes discourses from various strands of the contemporary US far right.

These ideas carry, however, different meanings in different settings. The public representation of Trump in such terms by a diplomat from another country, who would go on to become Minister of Foreign Affairs, suggests a direct, unmediated relationship between the international and national orders, while subordinating Brazil before the leadership of the United States.

Jair Bolsonaro resorts to this imaginary above all in speeches delivered at international forums. Within these speeches, references to Trump range from praise for the North American president's initiatives to citations of generic phrases by Trump:

> They questioned what is most sacred to us: our sovereignty! One of them, on the occasion of the G7 meeting, dared to suggest imposing sanctions on Brazil, without even hearing us out. I thank those who did not accept carrying forward this absurd proposal. In particular, President Donald Trump, who well encapsulated the spirit that should prevail among the countries of the UN: respect for the freedom and sovereignty of each one of us (Bolsonaro 2019).

The statement rings ironic at a time when his sons, Eduardo and Flávio Bolsonaro, are explicitly supporting the tariffs imposed by Trump on Brazil. At this point, the rejection of globalism is a central theme in Bolsonaro's speeches, closely echoing Trump's rhetoric. In the Global South, however, this discourse has different effects.

At other moments, Trump emerges as an even clearer model. At the 54th Southern Common Market (MERCOSUR) Summit, in the Argentine city of Santa Fé, Bolsonaro cites the North American president and his idea of a 'great America' as inspiration for the future of the subcontinent. The then president of Brazil emulates a certain Trumpist imaginary of criticism of multilateral institutions. A great MERCOSUR would not result from a stronger political-economic bloc, but from the greatness of each nation. The Bolsonaro government not only attacked Mercosur rhetorically but also took concrete steps to weaken the bloc's core institutions, as when it unilaterally reduced the Common External Tariff on imports from outside the bloc.

There are many similarities with the ideals surrounding the concept of 'America First,' central to the Make America Great Again (MAGA) movement: “As I see Trump saying, we want America to be great. I want Brazil to be great, I want Paraguay to be great, Argentina, Bolivia to be great too, Uruguay — that is our vocation” (Bolsonaro 2019b).

In Bolsonaro's words, the desired world has no multilateral institutions, but a great bloc composed according to cultural, moral, and religious criteria, the West, within which each nation possesses an almost unrestricted sovereignty, except where it conflicts with the interests of the bloc. Beyond the references cited above, this perspective emulates the ideas of Steve Bannon (Teitelbaum 2020), an influential figure in certain MAGA circles and one of the most relevant contacts of the Bolsonaro family with the North American political elite. Bolsonaro's declarations may be interpreted within a tradition of alignment with the United States, long-standing within the Latin American right (Chaloub 2023). The Brazilian president makes clear, however, how Trump's personal leadership is central to his worldview, particularly in the explicit declarations of support during the 2020 election. In a statement made during his first bilateral visit following his election, Bolsonaro exceeds the usual tone of contact between heads of state:

> I have always been a great admirer of the United States, and this admiration grew with Your Excellency's arrival at the presidency. (...) The United States changed in 2017, and Brazil also began to change in 2019. We are together for the good of our peoples. We want a great America and a great Brazil as well. Once again I express my gratitude to President Trump on this day when we seal a promising alliance between the two greatest democracies of the West. (Bolsonaro 2019c).

The declaration points not only to continuities, but to significant changes. The emulation of Trump's language emerges as an unequivocal inspiration, despite the differences between the two. The ideas of national greatness and change appear alongside references to God – central in Bolsonaro's discourse – and point to a certain similarity between the countries, defined as the two greatest democracies of the West. There is, however, a clear hierarchy, indicated by North American priority in relation to change and by the vocabulary used to refer to Trump, whether in the expression of public admiration or in the servile tone of gratitude.

As already noted, there are similarities, inflections, and differences between Bolsonaro's discourse and that of other Latin American political leaders, such as Javier Milei.

Trump as Seen by Milei

Javier Milei's political rise is tied to his cultivation of an eccentric persona, one which indicates an exceptional brand of leadership. In this regard, the Argentine president is closer to Trump than Bolsonaro is. Like the Republican president, Milei had a television career preceding his presidency and makes abundant use of theatrical gestures in his public appearances. There is much that is staged in Bolsonaro's live streams and public appearances, yet both appear sincere and genuine. Trump and Milei embrace the somewhat farcical dimension of their actions and do not aim, as Bolsonaro does, to

assume the role of ordinary men. While Bolsonaro moves between the images of military hero and common man of the people, the other two claim the role of extraordinary leaders, who operate above their fellow citizens.

The inspiration drawn from Trump is more explicit and articulated in Milei, going beyond praise or the reproduction of a language. If Trump's figure is above all that of the businessman, always capable of imposing himself and getting the best deal at others' expense, the Argentine assumes the place of the intellectual genius, capable of denouncing the errors of the 'caste' – on the right and above all on the left – and pointing out the best paths for Argentina and the world.

Some of Milei's speeches articulate a clear parallel between Trump's role in the United States and his own role in Argentina. Both would be outsiders, breaking with a political farce which failed to present voters with a real alternative. Both express the need to break with political elites entrenched in the state, which the Argentine calls the “caste” and the “party of the state,” and the North American calls the “deep state.” Speaking at CPAC in 2025, Milei declares:

> In Argentina, for example, we had a political system composed of about "50 shades of socialism." In the United States, there was the illusion of a two-party system, with a Democratic Party that set the agenda and a Republican Party incapable of confronting it… until the arrival of President Donald Trump. (...) Curiously, President Trump is an outsider, just like me, because the task that lies ahead of us, the challenge that lies ahead of us, is not for traditional politicians who have spent their whole lives living off the system. It is for people who owe nothing to anyone, who are not compromised by the vices of the system (Milei 2025).

The absence of ties to elites is central to their performance of political renewal: a task which demands exceptional individuals like Milei and Trump. Continuing his comparison, the Argentine president proclaims a new independence, this time against the state, flipping any accusations that the two are opposed to democracy on their head. Such accusations are merely a way for elites, entrenched in the state, to defend their privileges. In reality, both claim that their mandates are grounded in the will of the people to put an end to privileges and radically change the political landscape of Argentina and the United States:

> In short, they say that Trump and I are a danger to democracy, but in reality they are saying that we are a danger to them. We are a danger to the party of the state, to those who live off its unlimited expansion, to those who want a dependent individual subjected to their regulatory whims. And they know they are right: we are their worst nightmare. We are coming for their privileges, having been elected by the majority of each of our peoples, with the clear mandate to take away a power that does not belong to them. Today, our countries, Argentina

> and the United States, need to undergo a second Independence. The first freed us from the power of European monarchies; the second will free us from the tyranny of the party of the state (Milei 2025).

As a counterpoint to a past in which the country would have been “constrained by MERCOSUR,” Milei proposes full alignment with the United States, represented as the leader of the West. The speech bears many similarities with the Brazilian right (Chaloub 2023), but places greater emphasis on the dimension of the state and a certain primacy of the individual. There are traces of certain religious discourses, embedded in conservative and even reactionary ideologies, but they are less relevant than a radical vision of individualism.

It should be noted, however, that Milei's hyperindividualism is not conceived in a utilitarian key – as a doctrine capable of producing positive consequences and results – but, in the terms he sets out in his recent speech at the Davos Forum, as a moral doctrine: “However, unlike the way it was approached in the past, which was based on a utilitarian approach, today the defense of the free enterprise capitalist system must be based on its ethical and moral virtue” (Milei 2026). As he states twice in the aforementioned speech, Machiavelli is dead, owing to the “deep bond between morality and free markets” (Milei 2026), which makes everyone better people.

In response to the “ethical and moral degradation” of the West, Milei advocates inspiration drawn from Greek philosophy, Roman law, and Judeo-Christian values. The main references in the speech, however, are intellectuals linked to libertarianism, especially in its most radicalized and anti-democratic strands, such as Murray Rothbard, Hans-Hermann Hoppe, and Alberto Benegas Lynch. Amid numerous citations, the Argentine president defines his economic model as 'Make Argentina Great Again' (Milei 2026), an expression that echoes his political model. The second Trump administration thus emerges as a symptom of the return of the concept of freedom, which had been rejected and scorned by the West: “However, 2026 is the year in which I bring you good news: the world has begun to wake up. The best proof of this is what is happening in the Americas with the rebirth of the ideas of freedom. Therefore, America will be the beacon of light that re-ignites the whole of the West” (Milei 2026).

Beyond inspiration, Milei also highlights the direct assistance of the Trump administration to combat the representatives of the 'old regime.' In a clear acknowledgment of another country's intervention in Argentine domestic politics, he declares in a recent speech to the National Congress: “the government of Donald Trump came to the aid of our country. And that aid was not for economic reasons, but to defend us against the destabilizing assault of the representatives of the old regime. That is to say, you - the coup-mongers as always.” (Milei 2026b).

While he denounces MERCOSUR and advocates confrontation with Brazil on trade matters, a deep alliance with the United States takes shape, grounded in the ties

between the two presidents. In this scenario, Argentina would be the leading country in the South Atlantic, a strategic area of global geopolitics. The choice of ally does not pass, however, through utilitarian calculation, but through cultural affinity, anchored in Judeo-Christian values and the idea of the West. In a speech delivered in Israel in April 2026, Milei stated:

> I celebrate the consolidation of this friendship, which has been one of the pillars of our government's foreign policy and part of a return to the Judeo-Christian values that once made us great. Argentina strayed from that path, renouncing its founding values in search of alternatives that would justify the power structures of successive governments." (Milei, 2026c).

This framework casts the United States as the leader of a broader civilizational bloc:

> But all of this requires a lasting strategic alliance. And that is what we are building with the United States of America. This is not just an agreement between President Trump and President Milei. It has to do with the cultural affinity and strategic objectives shared between the two countries and the entire region. (...) We must create the century of the Americas: Make Americas Great Again, from Alaska to Tierra del Fuego. Let us make Argentina and America great again. (Milei 2026c).

The belligerent tone and megalomaniac geopolitical plans bring Milei and Trump closer together. On the other hand, the idea of a single America, under North American dominance, reveals the particularities of this model in the Global South, since it often presupposes an evident hierarchy. A great Argentina depends on an even greater America.

Two Readings of Trump and Their Consequences

The trajectories of Jair Bolsonaro and Javier Milei expose various aspects of the Latin American far right. They demonstrate different moments in the development of the political field and its diverse coalitions. Beginning in 2019, the Bolsonaro government inaugurated a new moment in the subcontinent and established a different pattern of relationship with the United States. While the northern neighbor has always been the most influential power in the regional landscape, the Brazilian president assumed a position of open inspiration and clear subservience that was rarely expressed so explicitly. There are continuities in relation to the repertoire and the usual actions of the Brazilian right, but a clear innovation in relation to the performances of the political leader.

Having been in office for just over two years, Milei already encountered a more consolidated landscape and earlier experiences already ended, such as that of

Bolsonaro himself. Between electoral victories and defeats, almost every country in the region has put forward far-right national leaders. Moreover, the Argentine president saw his administration coincide with a new and even more radical second-term Trump who proved more inclined toward interventions in the domestic politics of other countries and toward forceful transformations of the global geopolitical order. Big Tech's global bid for power has likewise grown considerably in recent years.

Amid their similarities, the two cultivate relevant differences in trajectories, discourses, and political languages. Bolsonaro emphasizes his trajectory as a former military man and mobilizes a certain idea of the warrior leader, while at the same time seeking to assume a popular image that would bring him closer to the poorer Brazilian. Milei, on the other hand, constantly reiterates his role as an intellectual and his supposed economic knowledge, which makes him someone special, quite distinct from his compatriots.

Both South American leaders' speeches frame Trump as an inspiration, from whom they draw expressions and slogans. During his term, Bolsonaro deferred to Trump as a civilizational leadership to which he is subordinate, without seeking to emulate a similar performance, and developed less the specific role of Trump in Brazilian domestic and foreign policy. The North American, in this sense, appears as one more relevant chapter in the ties between Brazil and the United States, having been capable of recovering something that had been lost. The discourse demonstrates the type of mobilization of the past typical of the Brazilian president, who adopts a rhetoric and aesthetic that seeks to construct the future from a certain idealized past. It may thus be said that in Bolsonaro's speeches Trump provides a repertoire and enables the reconstruction of a certain past.

Milei goes further. Rather than merely drawing on Trump's language and slogans, he directly emulates his typical performances. While there are broad references to a Judeo-Christian cultural past, the Argentine more frequently adopts an aesthetic of total rupture, in which the past occupies a less relevant place than in Bolsonaro's speeches.

Part of the difference stems from the political languages most frequently present in each president's public statements. While Bolsonaro almost always draws on something between fascism, reactionarism, and a certain conservatism typical of the Brazilian Armed Forces, Milei is above all an apostle of libertarianism. When interviewed in 2021, the Argentine president identified himself 'philosophically' as a 'market anarchist' and in 'real life' as a 'minarchist.'[1] Milei advocates for immediate rupture grounded in a certain ideal of the future; there is an idealized past, but it is less apparent than in the political languages mobilized by Bolsonaro. This type of doctrinal self-definition stands in contrast not only to Bolsonaro, but also to Trump, two leaders who reject explicit labels, even when these emerge from their public conduct.

[1] https://presenterse.com/javier-milei-creo-en-los-individuos-en-el-orden-espontaneo-y-el-autogobierno/

Trump appears in Milei's speeches both as a model of performance and as a new moment in the history of the two countries, which expands the role of Trump and of the Argentine president himself in the trajectory of both nations.

Amid these differences and similarities, the gaze toward the North reveals not only characteristics of North American leadership but also clues for understanding both the past and the future of the far right in South America. Geopolitical representations and identities do not fully explain the choices made by those in power, but they offer valuable clues to their motivations and nuances. In the case of the two presidents analyzed here, Milei's far more radical agenda is, to a large extent, explained by the differences between them.

Conclusion

Jair Bolsonaro followed a path close to the geopolitical imaginary of the Brazilian military conservative tradition, which advocates alignment with the United States as the leading nation of the West and a representative of Christian culture, yet does not relinquish a certain nationalism that limits the outright forfeiture of sovereignty. Milei, by contrast, seeks to reproduce the trajectory of Trumpism in the Argentine context: abandoning nationalism as a distinctive element. The Argentine president champions the legacy of the West rather than a national path for the far right in Argentina.

Faith in the centrality of Argentina's national destiny encourages the notion that the far-right movements of the Global North can be reproduced in Latin America, and this deepens their subordination to the world's most powerful countries. A figure like Milei, convinced of his own global importance, may thus produce even more disastrous results than Bolsonaro's government did by accepting Brazil's secondary place in the world.

Brazil's most recent presidential election was shaped by a strategy much closer to Milei's. In a marked departure from his father, Flávio Bolsonaro staked his campaign on open deference to Trump. A certain idea of the West justified discarding the language of national sovereignty long cherished by the Brazilian military, in favor of something resembling a far-right international led by the United States. The campaign also drew heavily on Big Tech, Milei, and other figures from the MAGA movement. The project, however, not only met resistance from much of the public but was defeated at the polls. Even so, the defeated candidate is doubling down. Following in the footsteps of his brother, Eduardo Bolsonaro, he has signaled his willingness to lead the opposition from the United States, casting himself as a victim of political persecution. Brazil's far right is now treading a path far closer to the one taken by Milei and Argentina.

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