

# Crafting Utopias through Environmental Denial: The Far-Right Populism of Bolsonaro and Milei

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ABSTRACT

Existing studies of radical right-wing populism have primarily analysed populist leaders like Milei and Bolsonaro through their retrotopian appeals to past authoritarianism, often overlooking their forward-looking utopian projections. This gap in the literature obscures how their rejection of the status quo frames the climate crisis as a manufactured dystopia – one they counter by dismissing its very existence. Drawing on insights from utopian studies, this research seeks to fill this gap by providing tools for deconstructing the covert utopias envisioned by these leaders. Specifically, it examines how Jair Bolsonaro (2019–2022) and Javier Milei (2024 – present) craft their utopian imaginaries and the role that environmental denial plays within them.

KEYWORDS

Utopias, environmental denial, far-right, populism, Brazil, Argentina

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## INTRODUCTION

In the current scenario, the growing demand for transition minerals is exacerbating the conflict between economic growth and environmental sustainability in the Global South (CRESCENTINO – CABALLERO 2025). While extractivism has long been a cornerstone of economic development in countries like Brazil and Argentina, such prevailing global dynamics have intensified this clash. Under the leadership of the radical right-wing populist presidents Jair Bolsonaro (2019–2022) and Javier Milei (2024–present), both of these States have reinforced deregulated resource extraction as the basis for export-led development strategies, dismissing environmental concerns as obstacles to economic revitalization. Thus, while much has been written about both leaders' reactionary economic and social policies, the environmental consequences of their agendas remain significantly under-researched. In this context, climate change denial is deeply intertwined with broader political and ideological agendas, which is consistent with a global reactionary movement that rejects the multilateral order in favour of economic freedom and reduces complex issues – such as climate change – to ideological tools in a binary struggle between liberalism and communism.

Despite the extensive literature on radical right-wing populism, existing studies tend to overlook how leaders like Milei and Bolsonaro not only invoke a nostalgic return to an imagined past – what Bauman (2017) refers to as 'retrotopia' – but also articulate a utopian future centred on individual freedom and entrepreneurship. This gap in the literature obscures the ways in which their rejection of the present frames the climate crisis as a *manufactured dystopia* – an *establishment* strategy for increasing control, where denial becomes resistance, and liberation an imperative. In this process, Bolsonaro and Milei present climate change as part of a *status quo* constructed through the lens of a *dystopian Other*, using it as a foil to define their visions of social and economic order. Yet, they frame their narratives with a pragmatic, technocratic veneer, rejecting any ideological or utopian underpinning. In doing so, they dismiss alternative political visions as ideological and utopian, while shielding their own expansionist agendas from critical scrutiny, thus embodying the 'anti-utopian utopianism' described by Levitas (2007: 300).

Drawing on insights from utopian studies, this research aims to fill the existing gap by exploring how Bolsonaro and Milei embed environmental denial within their broader political visions. I examine how they craft their utopian imaginaries and the role that environmental denial plays within them. The identification of these hidden utopias sheds light not only on the strategies of these leaders, but also on a broader phenomenon: the growing alignment between right-wing populism and climate scepticism. By portraying environmental concerns as dystopian constructs imposed by globalist elites, leaders like Bolsonaro and Milei legitimize extractivist policies, cast climate action as a threat to national sovereignty and economic growth, and rally support around narratives of liberation and self-sufficiency.

Following this introduction, the article is structured as follows: first, a theoretical analysis of the role of climate change denial within radical right-wing populism that also identifies gaps in the existing literature; second, an exploration of how these populist movements engage with utopian visions that introduces utopian studies as a framework to address these gaps and better understand the role of climate change denial in their political strategies; third, an empirical study of Bolsonaro and Milei's utopian frameworks and environmental denial; and finally, a conclusion presenting the findings and recommendations for future research.

## **RADICAL RIGHT-WING POPULISM AND CLIMATE CHANGE DENIAL**

Climate change denial has become a fundamental component of radical right-wing populism's vision for an alternative global order, particularly in the Global South, where it reinforces opposition to global governance, cosmopolitan elites, and environmental and economic constraints. Despite the differences between right-wing movements, their proposals for an alternative global future share some common features: a commitment to unilateral sovereignty, radical neoliberalism and an identity rooted in traditional values. Advocating a world free of 'globalist' impositions, they prioritize bilateralism and unregulated markets, echoing Hayekian notions of a self-regulating natural order (DE ORELLANA – MICHELSEN 2019: 766). This worldview also reflects the Schmittian friend-enemy distinction, in which globalization and its cosmopolitan ethos are portrayed as an existential

threat to national cohesion and traditional values. As Sanahuja and López Burian (2020) argue, right-wing populism frames this struggle as a retrotopical return to a lost Arcadia – an idealized past untouched by the forces of modernity and Enlightenment principles.

Domestically, right-wing populists' distrust of the liberal international order and its technocratic elites is reflected in a lack of faith in democratic institutions, which are seen as incapable of addressing societal problems in a timely manner. By intensifying the delegitimization of the system through *guerrilla tactics*, far-right populists mobilize their constituencies in cultural battles, which often leads to protest votes and provides fertile ground for radicalism (Betz 1994). Once in power, they institutionalize a crisis of representation with anti-elite, anti-pluralist rhetoric and performative strategies, invoking the 'common sense' of ordinary people to advance contentious political actions (Ostiguy 2020: 39; Jansen 2011; Müller 2016).

Framing the dismantling of the state and the liberation of the market as the only path to individual freedom (Betz 2022; Kestler 2022: 293), they position themselves as defenders of the national interest and direct public anger at the 'other' – those perceived as agents of globalist elites (Sanahuja – López Burian 2020). This 'other' includes the democratic state and the national establishment (political parties, corporate and financial elites, the media and academia), as well as voters who are unwittingly complicit in a system manipulated by elites who obscure the real forces eroding individual freedoms, and marginalized groups, who are portrayed as destabilizing traditional values. While structural factors such as the impact of globalization explain some of their appeal, Lockwood (2018) argues that the ideological content of these movements – authoritarian, socially conservative and nationalist values – provides a more compelling explanation.

In this context, deteriorating socio-economic conditions, coupled with the failure of traditional political parties to integrate a development model compatible with environmental sustainability, have led to a demobilization of environmental consciousness. As an alternative, far-right leaders have adopted authoritarian tactics to manage natural resources, relying on top-down, extractive strategies that are presented as essential as a means to create jobs, economic growth and national sovereignty and prosperity (Ofstehage – Wolford – Borrás 2022: 672). This emphasis on development and

recovery can be seen as part of broader utopian projections of progress where visions of a prosperous national future are constructed to legitimize policies that prioritize immediate economic gains over long-term environmental sustainability.

This crisis of representation highlights the challenges of addressing climate change as a complex and opaque issue. Lockwood (2018) notes that effective solutions require complex transnational cooperation to navigate numerous technical obstacles, trade-offs, intergroup compromises, uncertainties and long-term impacts. Furthermore, climate policy is often shaped by international scientific processes and negotiations that are often delegated to technocratic bodies. These dynamics fuel populist narratives that accuse liberal and cosmopolitan elites, including climate scientists and environmentalists, of prioritizing corrupt special interests over national concerns. Additionally, as Darian-Smith (2022: 287–288) points out, political leaders are often reluctant to prioritize issues such as climate change, partly because of the international cooperation required and partly because of the fact that policy outcomes are long-term, involve numerous variables and do not yield immediate electoral benefits. This reluctance reinforces critiques of liberal democracy by fostering mistrust of climate science and policy because of their complexity, which contradicts populist appeals for more direct and simplified governance.

This scepticism not only propagates distrust of technocratic governance, but also undermines confidence in climate science itself. As Roque (2023: 190) notes, this approach does not target science per se, but serves as a strategy to manage an existing crisis of confidence in the technocratic knowledge and actions of global organizations and their experts. By challenging established scientific claims and asserting their own interpretive authority, populist leaders seek to appeal to audiences that are increasingly skeptical of science and its benefits. In the context of this broader crisis of confidence (IBID.: 189), conspiracy theories become an important part of their communication strategy. These theories act as a ‘shield’ allowing populist leaders to deflect responsibility for governance failures, and as a ‘weapon’ positioning epistemic authorities (VON BEHR 2023) as untrustworthy elites with immoral agendas against the people.

Climate skepticism and denial thus become strategic tools within the far right's broader agenda to disrupt the entrenched *status quo*. By framing international climate frameworks, such as the 2030 Agenda, and domestic environmental regulations – as well as NGOs and environmental justice movements – as instruments of international elites and their multilateral institutions, they appeal to fears of loss of sovereignty and economic stagnation. Furthermore, this narrative helps to contrast a dystopian present marked by environmental collapse and regulatory overreach with a utopian vision of unregulated market freedoms, national self-determination and individual autonomy where economic development is not to be constrained by foreign agendas. As will be discussed, this vision is particularly important in extractivist economies such as Brazil and Argentina.

Building on these broader themes, it is crucial to examine the specificities of right-wing populism in the Global South, where local histories and structural conditions shape the rise of reactionary ideologies. Avoiding the traditional Orientalist dichotomy that positions the Global North as the source of knowledge and the Global South as a passive recipient, recent approaches call for a more nuanced understanding of political movements in these regions (MASOOD – NISAR 2020; PINHEIRO-MACHADO – VARGAS-MAIA 2023; KESTLER 2022). These perspectives emphasize how neoliberal policies intersect with social precariousness, creating fertile ground for reactionary populism. As Masood and Nisar (2020: 164) argue, studying right-wing movements in these contexts enhances our global understanding, offering a pluralist and decentralized view that better reflects the interconnectedness of right-wing narratives worldwide.

In light of these findings, the following section explores how utopian studies contribute to understanding the ways in which right-wing populist movements craft their narratives, including the role of climate change denial in their visions of an alternative social order.

## WHEN DID UTOPIAS TURN RIGHT? THE FAR RIGHT IN THE GLOBAL SOUTH

In 2016, scholars worldwide celebrated the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Thomas More's *Utopia*, recalling how utopianism can help transform the world by imagining alternative ideal realities. According to Pro (2022),

utopias embody the urge to challenge the established order and imagine its transformation, and criticize the present while looking with hope to what is *yet-to-come*. As Berenskoetter (2011: 657–662) outlines, utopias share three key characteristics: they are rooted in existing perceptions of reality, drawing on past and present experiences to be seen as plausible and connect with the familiar; they offer the potential for transformation, allowing individuals to imagine a future different from their current state; and they present open-ended visions that are adaptable to new experiences and ideas, allowing for broad interpretation and evolution over time.

Ultimately, examining utopias through this lens should facilitate an inquiry into the manner in which societies architecturally manifest these redefined ideals in concrete national and international policies and structures. Utopian impulses influence the horizons of expectations and create a context within which decision-makers can interact with their environment, articulate their interests, and define priorities for action. Berenskoetter (2014: 273) states that visions underpin all planning and investment processes. They engender expectations about the potential outcomes of actions and decisions, thereby influencing the way in which individuals and communities perceive their possibilities for being in the world.

While these authors provide a definition and key characteristics of utopia to operationalize the concept for analysis, many studies have used the term without doing so, as the development of a coherent social theory of utopia is a relatively recent endeavour. Despite its profound influence on Western philosophy, it was not until the 1970s that utopianism was recognized as an academic field in its own right. Indeed, the intellectual advances of the twentieth century intensified scholarly interest in the historical analysis and close examination of utopian constructs, as utopias were now recognized as a subject worthy of study. Since the 1960s, pioneers such as Ernst Bloch were instrumental in broadening the scope of the subject, moving it beyond mere literary analysis and firmly into social theory – thus creating the *concrete utopias* that underpin this research. Bloch's foundational work paved the way for the identification of recurring themes in earlier utopian literature and the development of complex theoretical frameworks for their analysis. In the following decades, utopian studies grew within the broader social sciences, where many theorists, including Bloch himself, approached utopia as a vision of social transformation.

At the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, as the Cold War drew to a close, the socialist alternative entered its final crisis. Eastern European intellectuals bade farewell to the Marxist utopia and embraced market principles and consumerism, while their Western counterparts celebrated the triumph of Western-style capitalism and liberal democracy as the end of history (KUMAR 2010: 558). Moving away from large-scale social movements, some scholars have since focused on the postmodern strategy of small-scale campaigns and micro-utopian imaginaries. These fragmented political expressions, which advocate minor cultural adjustments rather than challenging social structures (EAGLETON 1996: 23), are, as Žuk (2020: 9) points out, confined to a small segment of society that enjoys a degree of ontological security. Isolated from global issues, this minority engages in micro-campaigns that help assuage their guilt and justify their inaction towards systemic injustices. Meanwhile, the lack of progressive visions leaves the majority of society vulnerable to the simplistic narratives of those who promote black-and-white views, deepening political and social crises and fueling right-wing populism.

Certainly, utopias are based on the interpretations that social and political groups make of their reality, including their understanding of the *status quo* and their projections for the future. In this sense, every society is intertwined with utopian narratives, which function as contested spaces where the definition of the *status quo* is challenged and defied while people look with hope to what is *yet-to-come*. As Jameson (1981: 291) argues, even ideologies that support the interests of the ruling class contain utopian elements – not despite their role in preserving privilege, but because they invoke collective solidarity to sustain hegemonic agendas. Consequently, contemporary far-right movements also engage in the battle for public opinion by crafting simple, open-ended utopian visions based on familiar perceptions and presenting their proposals as scenarios of a hopeful future that challenges the established order. However, these visions ultimately help to affirm a collective solidarity around a project that primarily serves to perpetuate existing inequalities.

This perspective may seem at odds with the traditional view of utopias, which is often associated with progressive social movements. Nevertheless, already in the post-war period, Friedrich Hayek (1949) emphasized the need for a liberal utopia to challenge social justice and the visible



hand of the welfare state, which he identified as the *status quo* and the cause of liberalism's failure. His utopia involved the creation of a pluralistic and open Great Society of autonomous individuals by removing obstacles to the spontaneous operation of the market economy. This would facilitate the transition to a global market society in which the free movement of goods and people across open borders would enable the establishment of a new international economic order (BOURDEAU 2023). Such an emerging liberal utopia was soon countered by Milton Friedman (1962), who, while agreeing with Hayek on the dangers of state intervention, rejected the utopian vision of a liberal society. Taking a pragmatic, reality-based approach, he argued that the tendency to see state intervention as a remedy for market failure was ineffective, as it forces individuals to act against their own interests for a supposed 'greater good'. Rather than imposing an unrealistic ideal, Friedman advocated individual freedom and free markets as more effective mechanisms.

Although contemporary capitalism and neoliberal globalization have achieved certain aspects of Hayek's liberal utopia, many ultra-liberals – including Bolsonaro and Milei – continue to criticize the collectivist tendencies they see in the *status quo*, particularly in multilateral organizations. They argue that these tendencies undermine individual freedom and market efficiency, and that dismantling them is key to achieving genuine autonomy. In contrast, other political perspectives contend that the growing dominance of the market has created an ideological hegemony that stifles resistance, necessitating state intervention to counterbalance the monopolistic power of global market actors and protect democratic values. In the South American context, the rise of the 'new' left in the 2000s and the resurgence of the far-right illustrate how these critiques are manifested in political movements responding to the failures of globalization and the tensions between state and market.

However, the extent to which they acknowledge their utopian fore-sights varies. Since its emergence, the left embraced ideals advocating alternatives to capitalism in order to address its most damaging social consequences. As Pro (2018: 208) notes, the link between socialism and utopia was so strong that both the discourse of utopian socialism (from within the movement) and the concept of socialist utopia (from without) emphasized it. Despite the Marxist view of utopianism as naive and impractical, and

its use by conservatives to discredit projects of social change, the positive revival of utopia in the twentieth century was largely inspired by socialism. It is therefore not surprising that contemporary left-wing politicians sometimes invoke the term to describe the goals of their political projects.

In contrast, contemporary far-right movements often reject utopianism. Murray N. Rothbard (2006: 381), a key influence on Javier Milei, argued that utopian systems disregard individual autonomy and pragmatic realities, which led him to advocate a populist strategy based on paleolibertarian principles.<sup>1</sup> This strategy sought to expose and bypass elite institutions – politicians, bureaucrats, corporate elites, media and academia – to engage directly with the masses. In *Right-Wing Populism: A Strategy for Paleolibertarianism* (1992), he proposed the dismantling of the welfare state, the abolition of central banking and the promotion of punitive measures alongside ‘family values’ and nationalism, which is embodied in slogans such as ‘America First’. While rejecting state power, he advocated for robust social institutions and envisioned the formation of a coalition of Christian conservatives, radical libertarians, and members of the ‘old right’. Many of these principles, albeit with different emphases, continue to shape the political platforms of today’s right-wing leaders.

The diversity of coalitions informed by similar strategies has led these groups worldwide to adopt different approaches to gaining power, each envisioning distinct ways of ‘radically breaking’ with the present and shaping future expectations. This strategy of cultural warfare and grassroots mobilization has shaped their utopian anti-utopianism, their focus on challenging elite dominance, and their emphasis on cultural battles, while also fostering their cross-class appeal. Such elements are evident in both Bolsonaro and Milei’s political strategies, which involve direct public engagement, sharp criticism of elites, and a rejection of the establishment – including intellectuals. As we will see, this enables them to link climate change denial to their broader opposition to a system they perceive as undermining individual freedoms.

Building on these strategies, the relationship between conservatism and utopianism invites further examination. While conservatism is traditionally seen as opposed to radical change (MANNHEIM 1960; GOODWIN – TAYLOR 2009; LEVITAS 2011), and therefore incompatible with utopianism (SCRUTON 1980),

the cases of Bolsonaro and Milei complicate this view. Their adoption of Rothbard's populist strategy combines a conservative rhetoric with transformative aspirations. At the same time, liberalism itself promotes an implicit utopian model, depicting the world as dominated by a statist establishment and envisioning a society in which individuals enjoy absolute control over their bodies and property,<sup>2</sup> free from state interference and, as Milei and Bolsonaro argue, *parasitic politicians*. This vision is consistent with their emphasis on free market principles and a society based on voluntary cooperation and private property rights. In this context, the interaction between social conservatism and paleolibertarian liberalism has given rise to a transnational utopian vision which, in a previous study, I called reactionary utopia (CRESCENTINO 2023).

Such utopianism is consistent with de Orellana and Michelsen's (2019) notion of reactionary internationalism, which, in line with Berenskoetter's characteristics of utopia, encompasses three inter-related dimensions. First, it involves the conscious adoption of a resistant subjectivity within a system perceived as dominated by unaccountable international technocratic decision-makers who serve global elites, while simultaneously advancing a reactionary stance that seeks to capture the state in order to dismantle liberal international norms and institutions. Second, this stance reimagines these structures through a radical vision rooted in individualism and free-market principles, drawing on Hayek's spontaneous order, Friedman's advocacy for limited state intervention, and Rothbard's blend of libertarian economics with conservative values. It presents a hopeful alternative to state control and globalist norms where free trade and the market's invisible hand are seen as guarantors of prosperity and peace. Third, it evokes simple, vague and open-ended visions that appeal to a wide range of social classes and age groups through a deliberately vague political agenda. This includes legitimizing anti-scientific narratives, such as climate change denial, by framing them as *dystopian* constructs of the multilateralist *status quo* aimed at restricting individual freedom.

Thus, by exposing the utopian elements hidden in the anti-utopian rhetoric of right-wing leaders, utopian studies provide a critical framework for deconstructing their discourses, revealing that their proposals are not simply emotional responses to public discontent, but deliberate efforts to

emulate hopeful future utopias. The following section analyzes the case studies of Bolsonaro and Milei, focusing on the role of climate change denial in shaping their visions of social order.

## **BOLSONARO AND MILEI: ARCHITECTS OF THE SOUTH AMERICAN FAR-RIGHT**

Throughout the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Argentina and Brazil experienced a significant institutional instability largely shaped by the global dynamics of the Cold War. The period reached its zenith with the rise of violent anti-communist military dictatorships—with the Brazilian one lasting from 1964 to 1985, and the Argentinian one from 1976 to 1983 – followed by complex democratization processes. These transitions resulted in a commitment to liberal democratic principles and the development of competitive party systems, while remaining anchored in neoliberal economic development models. In this context, Brazil's Social Democracy (PSDB) and Democratic Movement and Workers (PT) parties, and Argentina's Justicialist (PJ) and Radical Civic Union (UCR) parties assumed leadership roles in the political landscape, consolidating the social rejection of authoritarianism.

After a decade of neoliberal liberalization in the 1990s, the reformist rhetoric of South America's new left governments became widespread, while the right found an unfavourable narrative in much of Latin America (LUNA – ROVIRA KALTWASSER 2014). In Brazil and Argentina, the PT and the PJ embraced progressive social reforms without dismantling the neoliberal economic framework of their predecessors (ROJAS 2024: 67). This limited transformation, heavily reliant on an economic re-primarization,<sup>3</sup> proved unsustainable in the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis. As economic instability deepened, internal divisions over governance failures, corruption scandals, and environmental policy fueled discontent, exposing rifts within the ruling coalitions and emboldening opposition forces.

Against this backdrop, reactionary narratives gained traction, portraying left-wing governments as an entrenched socialist *status quo* aligned with 'globalist elites' and hostile to national traditional values (MIRRELES 2018; STEWART 2020). Drawing on the American alt-right, such discourses exacerbated political polarization by framing moderately reformist social

policies as either ‘leftist’ or ‘communist’ (WINK 2021: 39). Initially marginal, these imaginaries gained traction with the rise of the conservative, moderate-right governments of Mauricio Macri in Argentina (2015–2019) and Michel Temer in Brazil (2016–2018), both of whom were heavily criticized by far-right movements for being part of the ‘globalist *status quo*’. Ultimately, their inability to provide a stable alternative to the left and address the concerns of disaffected voters reinforced the dominance of intolerant and extreme political narratives.

In 2016, Jair Bolsonaro’s incendiary remarks during the impeachment of Brazilian President Dilma Rousseff, a member of the PT, set the stage for his rise to power, which culminated in his inauguration as president in 2019. Meanwhile, in Argentina, media economist Javier Milei rose to prominence amid the failures of both the PJ governments (2003–2015 and 2019–2023) and the liberal coalition Cambiemos (a partnership between Propuesta Republicana and the UCR, which governed from 2015 to 2019). Milei’s rise to the presidency in 2023 coincided with Bolsonaro’s defeat in his bid for re-election in Brazil, ensuring the permanence of a particular worldview and approach to politics in the South American political landscape. The two leaders share a populist, anti-establishment rhetoric, with a significant emphasis on state retrenchment.

Academic analyses highlight several key factors behind the electoral success of these leaders. In Brazil, economic downturns, escalating corruption scandals, rising insecurity, and a loss of public trust were crucial in this respect (HUNTER – POWER 2019; PEREYRA DOVAL 2021). In Argentina, these issues were compounded by uncontrolled inflation, declining confidence in the local currency, and a surge in drug-related violence, and these problems were exacerbated by a prolonged COVID-19 quarantine that exposed the challenges of balancing public health and economic stability (ROJAS 2024; SENDRA – MARCOS-MARNE 2024). Together, these concerns fuelled the delegitimization of traditional political parties and convinced voters that drastic change was needed. A common theme in the speeches of Bolsonaro and Milei is their criticism of what they see as an inefficient and overly restrictive state, which reflects a subjectivity resistant to the existing domestic socio-political order. As noted above, such critiques can be understood as a reactionary response to the *status quo* from which the utopian ideals

they espouse arise, with the aim of overturning the prevailing system in favour of a reimagined social model.

Despite subtle differences, both advocate the free market as the primary allocator of resources and promote an ultra-liberal economic model, presenting a vague but compelling utopian vision of a future in which state intervention is minimized and individual freedoms are maximized. Furthermore, while their approach to development mirrors the extractivist policies of previous governments, they differ significantly in their rejection of international norms, particularly the scientific consensus on environmental issues. To gain electoral traction, their political platforms oversimplify such complex issues, framing them as a dichotomy between liberalism and ‘cultural Marxism’, and creating open-ended narratives that resonate with a wide audience. These narratives not only legitimize continued extractivism as a means of economic revitalization, but, as noted above, also reject climate change as a product of the multilateralist *status quo* that, in their view, restricts individual freedom and national economic progress.

In order to synthesize the analysis of this process, this section is divided into two parts. First, it examines both future-oriented projects, analyzing their critique of the *status quo* and their proposals of a domestic liberal utopia *à la Hayek* that is internationally intertwined with a reactionary utopia. Second, it assesses how the convergence of these ideas employs a mass mobilization scheme that promotes an extractivist development model accompanied by anti-scientific sentiments and climate change denial strategies that help mobilize voters.

### **CULTURE WAR: INTELLECTUAL ENDEAVOURS, THE *STATUS QUO* AND THE REACTIONARY UTOPIA**

The rise of Bolsonaro and Milei was not just a political shift, but the manifestation of a new reactionary intellectual space that disrupted the established order. Positioned at the crossroads of the dominant parties, this alternative space fused Hayekian ideals with alt-right rhetoric, led by a wave of liberal activists who used social media to mainstream their agenda. Their discourse fused an instrumentally authoritarian, morally conservative, and economically ultra-liberal agenda (WINK 2021), transcending

traditional right-wing divisions in Argentina and Brazil while reshaping the historical tensions between liberal-conservatives and nationalist-reactionaries (VICENTE – GRINCHPUN 2024).

In pursuit of this goal, leading intellectuals within these political circles – such as Olavo de Carvalho in Brazil and Nicolás Márquez and Agustín Laje in Argentina – advocated an *anti-progressive culture war*. They argued that despite the collapse of the Soviet Union, communism had entrenched itself in the cultural sphere and established a dominant *status quo*. According to their narrative, this dominance was achieved through the lobbying efforts of economic (transnational corporations), political (multilateral organizations and states) and ideological (academia, media and entertainment) actors. They claimed that having failed to abolish private property – the cornerstone of liberalism – this ‘communist’ agenda had shifted its focus to promoting *political correctness, multiculturalism and gender ideology*. These efforts, they claimed, were designed to undermine Western Christian values and institutions, particularly the family, in order to weaken capitalism from within. Thus, unlike the historical tendency of the far right towards economic segregation, this new movement seeks to unite liberal-conservative and nationalist-reactionary forces through *cultural guerrilla tactics* to form a radical opposition to progressivism.

Building on this ideological foundation, their strategy to consolidate power and influence involves a distinctive approach to appealing to ‘real people’, bypassing traditional media controlled by the *establishment* and instead using social media to communicate directly and freely. Their adoption of symbols (such as firearms in Brazil or chainsaws in Argentina, often alongside national and Gadsden flags) and their use of provocative rhetoric aim to attract media and public attention, defy ‘political correctness’ and assert their authenticity as the voice of the people, while emphasizing a reluctance to conform to elite norms (KIDRON – ISH-SHALOM 2024). This search for new communication mechanisms implicitly critiques not only traditional media but also conventional institutional spaces for political dialogue. In this context, the ‘anti-woke’ backlash consistently targets democracy and the political party system, advocating for reform while simultaneously invoking nostalgia for the authoritarian era and its associated values (SANTOS – TANSCHKEIT 2019: 157), such as state control over social behaviour and the repression of activists and social movements. This

analysis creates fertile ground for retrotopian ideals that promise a return to an imagined past of order and tradition, positioning it as a counterpoint to the perceived chaos of contemporary liberal democracies.

In Brazil, the rationale for the political cleansing was based on the conviction that the PT was establishing connections with other regional authoritarian regimes through the São Paulo Forum, with the objective of promoting a communist Bolivarian dictatorship. Bolsonaro's political slogan 'Brazil above everything, God above all' appealed to the oligarchic elites, the armed forces and the church as a symbol of security and morality (PEREYRA DOVAL 2021). His strategy also encompassed executive intervention in other branches of government, particularly the judiciary and the legislature. He frequently advocated military intervention and threatened to close Congress and the Supreme Court. Moreover, through discursive allusions to biblical fragments or the use of the integralist slogan 'God, Homeland and Family' at his party's rallies, he encouraged the revival of conservative values from Brazil's authoritarian experience.

Reflecting a convergence of anti-PT sentiment and Brazil's tradition of anti-communist ideology, right-wing blogs and social media popularized alternative interpretations of the 1964–1985 civil-military dictatorship, presenting it as a safeguard against leftist dominance (BIVAR 2020). As a former military officer himself, Bolsonaro also leveraged the social capital of the military as an impartial, technocratic enforcer of order to consolidate his authoritarian rule. With this in mind, he appointed military personnel to ministerial and bureaucratic positions with the intention of protecting politics from a truly neutral and national standpoint (WINK 2021: 241). This strategy enabled him to exploit both the favorable public perception of the armed forces and the anti-PT sentiment within the military, particularly following the establishment of a National Truth Commission (2011–2014) to investigate human rights abuses during the dictatorship (PIROTTA 2023).

A similar phenomenon occurred in Argentina, where the PJ government was accused of supporting the communist Bolivarian ideals associated with the São Paulo Forum. For years, the nationalist right has argued that the current PJ is a continuation of the subversive armed groups of the 1970s, which they claim made the dictatorship (1976–1983) necessary (VICENTE – GRINCHPUN 2024: 188). This narrative suggests that the same left-wing



groups have remained in power since the return of democracy, and that the human rights policies implemented since then have been used to justify subversive terrorism, the targeting of the military, and the profiting from corrupt business practices. In response, right-wing groups have promoted historical revisionism to offer a different account of the dictatorship, arguing that the official version of events was shaped by those who, despite their military defeat, managed to secure a political and cultural victory. In this context, they stress the need to engage in a cultural struggle to re-shape this history.

However, Milei's retrotopian project allows him to present a vision of a utopian society that is both deeply rooted in the past and forward-looking. This is evident not only in his revolutionary aesthetic, which recalls the Argentine liberators of the 19th century, but also in his political discourse, where his critique of mass democracy goes beyond mere nostalgia for the dictatorship. Much like Trump's MAGA, Milei's rhetoric reflects a desire to restore Argentina's 'greatness' of the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century, while framing this vision in the context of contemporary challenges. To achieve this, he advocates the systematic dismantling of the state development since 1916, when the first mass party came to power. However, as previously discussed, this stance is not driven by conservatism alone. As he is a paleolibertarian, Milei's critique of the state extends beyond its collective organization, which he argues fails to unite diverse interests into a common will and imposes the allegedly dangerous rule of the majority over minorities (REYNARES – VIVAS 2023). Accordingly, he advocates its complete dissolution, envisioning a utopian system in which individuals have full control over their bodies and property, and are free from state and political intervention.

In this context, while the political ascent of Milei and Bolsonaro is grounded in a retrotopian authoritarian agenda, their success also reflects their projection of a liberal utopia influenced by Hayek. As outlined in their speeches, both leaders share the ideal of an ultra-liberal society free from state corruption and inefficiency (WINK 2021). In opposition to the current social protection system, which they argue perpetuates a stagnant, state-dependent class lacking the motivation to innovate, they envision a system where the free market becomes the ultimate mechanism for social inclusion. This system would be driven by competition (the organizing

principle of a dynamic society) and inequality (the essence of freedom and self-regulation) (GIAVEDONI 2023). This position was articulated in their early presidential speeches:

*“I stand before the whole nation on this day as the day when the people began to free themselves from socialism, from the inversion of values, from state gigantism and political correctness.[...] Brazilians can and should dream, dream of a better life with better conditions to enjoy the fruits of their labour through meritocracy”* (BOLSONARO 2019A).

*“In the economy we will bring the sign of confidence, national interest, the free market and efficiency.[...] We must create a virtuous cycle for the economy that will provide the necessary confidence to open our markets to international trade, while stimulating competition, productivity and efficiency without ideological bias”* (BOLSONARO 2019B).

*“Today a new era begins in Argentina, an era of peace and prosperity, of growth and development, of freedom and progress.[...] The only possible solution is adjustment, an orderly adjustment that falls squarely on the state and not on the private sector.[...] The situation in Argentina is critical and urgent. We have no alternatives and no time[...]. The political class is leaving a country on the brink of the deepest crisis in our history[...]. Today we begin to leave the path of decadence and take the path of prosperity; we have everything to become the country we have always dreamed of”* (MILEI 2023C).

*“Libertarianism is full respect for the life project of others based on the principle of non-aggression, [and] in defense of the life, liberty and property of the individual. Its basic institutions are private property, markets free from state intervention, free competition, division of labour and social cooperation.[...] This is the model we propose for the future of Argentina. A model based on the fundamental principles of libertarianism: the defense of life, liberty and property”* (MILEI 2024A).

By positioning inequality as the engine of economic dynamism and social progress, the application of this liberal utopia allows for intellectual continuity with the extractivist approach of previous progressive governments, while avoiding the contradictions of their social commitments, including environmental concerns. In this context, climate change denial

becomes a key element in the intellectual articulation of these movements in line with their broader rejection of global governance and progressive environmental policies.

### **MOBILIZING THE MASSES: EXTRACTIVISM AND ENVIRONMENTAL DENIAL**

As noted above, the 2008 financial crisis left a lasting legacy of deteriorating socio-economic conditions in Brazil and Argentina, which was exacerbated by the inability of traditional political parties to devise a development model that could reconcile economic growth with environmental sustainability. In this context, far-right leaders in power adopt authoritarian tactics to manage natural resources, relying on top-down extractive strategies that were framed as essential for job creation, economic growth and the safeguarding of national sovereignty and prosperity (OFSTEHAGE – WOLFORD – BORRAS 2022: 672).

However, in Brazil and Argentina, authoritarianism alone is not enough to quell civil opposition, resistance or the growing environmental awareness of extractive activities, as leaders must also secure the support of their constituencies to win elections and maintain the backing of their political allies to ensure the advancement of their initiatives. As a result, from the outset, the development model became an important arena for political polarization. As Moffitt (2015: 189–190) argues, populism not only emerges from crises but also seeks to provoke them by exposing failures that contribute to a crisis atmosphere, while polarizing public opinion through the media and simplifying political discourse. In this sense, the strategy of manufacturing opposition on environmental issues not only strengthened the traditional populist framework of opposition on which to construct ‘otherness’ and legitimize one’s own position by generating alternative knowledge ‘outside the mainstream’, but also provided legitimacy for the liberal utopian policies of state retrenchment and deregulation.

By framing both the global and domestic environmental protection framework and civil society environmental organizations as elements of the *status quo* to be challenged, the populist leaders legitimized environmental degradation through sovereign and economic discourses that were

often accompanied by alternative scientific explanations that downplayed the significance of climate change. This perspective is consistent with evidence suggesting that right-wing populism is often accompanied by a rejection of the scientific consensus on climate issues (LOCKWOOD 2018; JYLHÄ - HELLMER 2020; DARIAN-SMITH 2022; ROQUE 2023; VON BEHR 2023), as it is consistent with anti-establishment sentiments.

When examining Jair Bolsonaro's environmental rhetoric, one can see that structural factors play an important role in shaping his approach. As Mendes Motta and Hauber (2022) argue, he capitalized on Brazil's economic crisis by framing environmental policies as obstacles to growth and portraying them as constraints imposed by international elites. This narrative sought to delegitimize environmental regulations and institutions while advancing an agenda that prioritized market-driven development, paving the way for the consolidation of his liberal utopia. Such a strategy was particularly beneficial to the extractive sector and global agribusiness, which were key allies for Bolsonaro that he portrayed as 'unfairly constrained' by existing environmental laws (MENEZES - BARBOSA 2021: 232; MENDES MOTTA - HAUBER 2022: 643).

Nevertheless, Bolsonaro's liberal utopia was limited by the conservatism inherent in the nationalist geopolitical vision of the armed forces, which were his key allies during his administration. Central to this vision was the concept of sovereignty, which the military saw as contingent on the occupation and exploitation of natural resources to assert territorial control and counter the perceived foreign encroachment in the Amazon. This perspective directly informed Bolsonaro's environmental agenda:

*"It's about national sovereignty[...]. I will leave the Paris Agreement if this continues to be an issue. If our part is to hand over 136 million hectares of the Amazon, then I'm out"* (BOLSONARO 2018).

*"It is a fallacy to say that the Amazon is the patrimony of humanity, and a mistake, as scientists attest, to say that our forest is the lungs of the world. Taking advantage of these fallacies, some countries, instead of helping, have bought into the lies of the media and behaved in a disrespectful, colonialist manner. They have questioned what is most sacred to us: our sovereignty! [...] I would like to reiterate my position that any initiative to help or support the conservation of the*

*Amazon rainforest or other biomes must be treated with full respect for Brazilian sovereignty. We also reject attempts to instrumentalize the environmental issue [...] for the benefit of external political and economic interests, especially those disguised as good intentions” (BOLSONARO 2019C).*

As Toni and Chaves (2022) note, Bolsonaro strategically manipulated environmental and climate issues by framing international concerns as a threat to Brazil’s sovereignty, particularly in relation to the Amazon rainforest. In this context, deforestation in the Amazon was trivialized and scientific evidence was dismissed as biased and manipulated by international interests, which further legitimized the anti-science narrative that underpinned his policies. This tactic stoked nationalist sentiments within the government and motivated the armed forces to defend Brazil’s sovereignty and territorial integrity.

In parallel, the president and his ministers – notably Ernesto Araújo (Minister of Foreign Affairs, 2019–2021) – simultaneously promoted two interrelated narratives based on climate scepticism: a) the historical argument that environmental concerns have been used by wealthy nations to hide their own responsibility for environmental degradation and to justify protectionist measures in agribusiness and carbon markets; and b) the post-1990s conservative claim that global warming is a construct driven by left-wing ideologies, and designed to centralize global power, undermine Western democracies, and weaken national sovereignty and interests:

*“Nationalism has emerged as the main convergence of forces opposing globalism [...]. One [of the instruments of globalism] is the ideology of climate change, or ‘climatism’ [...]. So is there climate change? Yes, of course, there has always been. Is it caused by humans? A lot of people say yes, but we don’t know for sure. [...] Is this change so catastrophic that it requires the worst sacrifices, as is often said today? No [...] The purpose of climatism is to put an end to normal democratic political debate. The propagators of this ideology want to create a ‘moral equivalent of war’, to impose policies and restrictions that run counter to fundamental freedoms” (ARAÚJO 2018).*

This narrative portrayed international institutions, scientific consensus and environmentalists as tools of a global elite intent on curtailing

Brazil's autonomy. Like Araújo, Bolsonaro frequently cited alternative conspiratorial studies to justify his anti-science stance (VON BEHR 2023), particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic, but also in relation to climate change. In the long run, even though it was based on conservatism, such an approach facilitated the extension of the liberal utopia by paving the way for justifying and legitimizing the deregulation and defunding of environmental protection, the reduction of state control in this regard and the opening up of indigenous reserves to exploitation, among other measures (ROQUE 2023).

Eventually, this strategy backfired and affected Bolsonaro's governance (especially in relation to the 2019 Amazon fires and the COVID-19 pandemic), damaged Brazil's international reputation, affected its development model and trade agreements (including EU-MERCOSUR), and led to a decline in his popularity. As noted by Toni and Chaves (2022: 476), although Bolsonaro then softened his rhetoric and replaced key ministers with more moderate figures, these changes did not result in significant domestic policy shifts. In this respect, despite his losing the 2022 election to his opponent Lula da Silva (2023–present), being charged with an attempted coup in early 2023, and being banned from holding public office until 2030, Bolsonaro's role as an opposition figure has become increasingly radicalized. This suggests that despite his electoral defeat, he remains committed to consolidating a future liberal agenda.

Indeed, the Brazilian liberal utopia finds its hopes confirmed by the transnationalization of the networks of the reactionary utopia in its neighbour. In the case of Argentina it remains difficult to draw definitive conclusions, as Javier Milei has only been in office for a year. However, certain trends have emerged since his rise as a media figure and his time in Congress. Drawing lessons from Bolsonaro's failures, Milei continues to dismiss warnings of anthropogenic climate change as a socialist invention. Throughout his career as a media figure, a parliamentarian and now the president, Milei has consistently criticized the state's involvement in scientific research institutions and the scientists themselves, portraying them as defenders of the *status quo*. This criticism has been central to his political rhetoric and is reflected in his strategy of defunding universities and research institutes, including those focused on climate change. While his libertarian stance allows him to oppose state interventionism, it does

not extend to outright climate change denial. Instead, he offers his own interpretation of scientific facts. He summarized this view during a presidential debate:

*“I am not denying climate change; I am saying that there is a temperature cycle in the history of the earth and this is the fifth point in the cycle. The difference from the previous four is that [in those,] humans were not involved. Therefore, all the policies that blame humans for climate change are bogus and just designed to raise money to fund socialist bums who write rubbish papers”* (MILEI 2023B).

Milei’s environmental discourse is also situated in the context of a prolonged economic crisis that has promoted narratives that prioritize economic growth over all other considerations. His rhetoric thus mirrors that of Bolsonaro, as both leaders employ populist strategies that reject scientific consensus in favor of appealing to the fears and economic concerns of their bases. Like his Brazilian counterpart, Milei argues that environmental regulation, like other forms of state intervention, hinders development and should be subordinated to the imperative of economic growth. Beyond this, he also frames environmental regulation as a tool imposed by international actors to undermine national sovereignty. But his critique also extends to the domestic political class, which he accuses of promoting these regulations in order to serve the interests of the elite, thereby prioritizing them over the needs of ordinary citizens:

*“God has blessed our country with an enormous wealth of natural resources. [...] But politicians have listened more to the demands of noisy minorities and environmental organizations funded by foreign millionaires than to [assertions of] the prosperity needs of Argentines. [...] Nature should serve man and his well-being, not the other way around. Environmental problems must put people at the centre, which is why the main environmental problem we have is extreme poverty. And the only way to solve it is to use our resources”* (MILEI 2024B).

*“You will never see our administration advocate [...] sustainable development proposals that prioritize the whims of pot-bellied politicians in rich countries when poor countries need to exploit their resources to lift themselves out of poverty”* (MILEI 2024C).

*“Let me take this opportunity to clarify this administration’s position on some of the slogans of the misnamed ‘global governance’.[...] When it comes to restricting the right of countries to freely exploit their natural resources, we’re out.[...] In the coming decades we will see another race, a fiscal and deregulatory race in which the countries that protect individual freedom will prosper. [These countries will be t]hose that unleash their productive forces” (MILEI 2024D).*

Incorporating climate change into the conspiratorial perception of a globalist agenda and the dominance of a transnational elite provides populist leaders like Bolsonaro and Milei with a platform to critique both climate decision-making and the scientific theories that inform it. In contrast to bureaucrats from distant transnational institutions imposing top-down directives, the populist leaders’ approach simulates a decision-making process in which the masses are directly involved. Similarly, against the cautious and dubious understandings of the scientific community, far-right leaders offer their own ‘scientific’ truth. As Bolsonaro and Milei themselves stated:

*“On climate issues [...], all we need is to contemplate the truth following John 8:32: ‘And you shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free” (BOLSONARO 2019C).*

*“Global warming is another socialist lie. Ten or fifteen years ago, they argued that the planet was freezing. Those who know how these simulations are made will see that the functions are deliberately oversaturated in certain parameters to create fear” (MILEI 2021).*

*“Another conflict raised by socialists is that of man versus nature. They argue that humans are damaging the planet and that it must be protected at all costs, even going so far as to advocate population control mechanisms or the tragedy of abortion. The cruelest part of the environmental agenda is that rich countries, which became rich by legitimately exploiting their natural resources, now seek to atone for their guilt by punishing poorer countries and preventing them from developing their economies for an alleged crime they did not commit” (MILEI 2024A).*

In addition, Milei’s lack of a sovereignist component leads him to target what he sees as a statist, communist international elite that he claims is



undermining Argentines' economic freedom. However, this perspective also draws on his liberal utopia, as his support for the privatization of natural resources and the freedom to pollute becomes central to his arguments based on the belief that market forces, driven by consumer demand, will naturally limit corporate damage to the environment:

*"If we have a problem with externalities, it is because we have a problem with poorly defined property rights. [...] If a company pollutes a river, [...] this is a society where they have a lot of water and the price of water is zero. So who is going to apply property rights to that river? Nobody, because they can't make any money. [...] What do you think will happen when the water runs out? It stops being worth anything and then I have a business; someone will take over that river and then there will be property rights and they will see how the pollution ends"* (MILEI 2023A).

Such a belief has shaped his executive and legislative agenda since his taking office, as he has prioritized state reduction, economic deregulation, and resource management. In practice, this was reflected in the initial draft of the *Law of Foundations and Starting Points for the Freedom of Argentines* (2024), which proposed reforms to environmental laws to attract investment. Although it was ultimately rejected by Congress,<sup>4</sup> this reform bill perfectly encapsulated Milei's desire to advance the much-promised liberal utopia for Argentina.

With three years left in his term, there is little sign of a change in direction beyond strategies aimed at consolidating his ruling alliance. Notably, he is the Argentine president who has travelled abroad the most relative to the length of his term, often participating in ultra-liberal and reactionary transnational forums. This pattern suggests, in line with Hayek's aspirations, that despite the slow realization of his liberal utopia in Argentina, Milei seeks to position himself as a global intellectual leader of libertarian ideals and reactionary right-wing thought.

## CONCLUSIONS

This article has examined the nexus between utopian studies and right-wing populism, with a particular focus on the environmental denial in Brazil under Bolsonaro (2019–2022) and that in Argentina under

Milei (2024–present). Drawing upon a contemporary interpretation of Hayek’s liberal utopia – based on an intellectual framework that combines instrumental authoritarianism, moral conservatism and economic ultraliberalism (WINK 2021) – the paper analyzes Bolsonaro and Milei as key South American architects of radical right-wing populism. Both leaders advanced narratives deeply embedded in their respective national histories to promote domestic liberal utopias while simultaneously contributing to the global dissemination of a reactionary utopia.

The study illustrates how the far-right discourse in Brazil and Argentina extends the traditional populist dichotomy between ‘the people’ and ‘the elite’ to the environmental sphere. The related movements conceptualize global climate frameworks and scientific knowledge as instruments of an elite seeking to maintain the *status quo*, using climate denial and conspiracy theories to undermine the scientific consensus on climate change. By framing the climate crisis as a *manufactured dystopia*, they reinforce their own liberal utopian visions of a social order in which unregulated market freedoms, national self-determination and individual autonomy take precedence over environmental concerns. In practice, this narrative serves to delegitimize environmental regulation, justify the expansion of extractive industries and mobilize far-right constituencies.

This research agenda remains open for further exploration, particularly in the context of right-wing populism, both in government and in opposition, and the role of environmental policies and utopian imaginaries in legitimizing such regimes. Future research could also explore the different societal responses to climate change in Argentina and Brazil, where increasing insecurity, economic hardship and political polarization have led certain segments of the population to prioritize issues other than environmental concerns, with some individuals resorting to climate change denial as a coping mechanism. Such research would contribute to a more nuanced understanding of the intersection between populism, environmental discourse and public perceptions of climate challenges in these countries.

Finally, the long-term impact of these environmental policies remains to be seen. In his third term, Brazilian President Lula da Silva has acknowledged these complexities by incorporating environmental concerns into his

agenda. However, tensions within his administration —such as recurring conflicts over environmental regulations and resource extraction— underscore how the global demand for strategic minerals remains a structural constraint on any government’s ability to change established neo-extractivist models. With Milei’s administration still in its early stages, both the economic success of his policies and the reactions of civil society and Argentina’s political landscape remain uncertain.

## ENDNOTES

- 1 Paleolibertarianism, as defined by Rothbard, merges libertarian economics with cultural conservatism, promoting minimal state intervention and traditional values. This explains why paleolibertarians are neither simply libertarians – given their emphasis on cultural conservatism – nor at all anarchists – as they are minarchists, supporting a minimal state to protect property rights.
- 2 Nevertheless, as noted above, the concept of bodily autonomy and property control in paleolibertarianism is framed within a context of conservative moral values that grant such rights primarily to white, heterosexual males. In this view, these rights are both racialized and gendered, extending unequally across different social groups.
- 3 An increasing reliance on extractivism that undermines industrial and technological development.
- 4 The final version focused exclusively on the Hydrocarbons Law, giving the national executive authority to regulate the environmental management of hydrocarbon activities with the approval of provincial governments. This was followed by the May Pact, which committed provincial governments to promoting the exploitation of natural resources.

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## NOTE

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