

The Limits of the Right-Wing Nation: A Comparative Analysis of Far-Right Discourse in Bolivia and Brazil (2016–2023)

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Abstract: Over the past decade, the rise of the far right in Latin America has generated a substantial body of scholarship. Yet there remains a striking lack of theoretical and conceptual frameworks to account for the historical specificity of this phenomenon in the region. This article seeks to address that gap through a comparative study of the ideological profiles of the far right in Bolivia and Brazil between 2016 and 2022, focusing on their two main leaders: Luis Fernando Camacho, former governor of Santa Cruz, and Jair Bolsonaro, former president of Brazil. To do so, we draw on a range of empirical sources as well as existing scholarship on both contexts. The choice of Bolivia and Brazil, along with the selected timeframe, reflects the fact that both countries experienced a similar political trajectory: the crisis of progressive governments, the emergence of far-right leaders, and the eventual return of progressives to power. At the same time, the Brazilian and Bolivian cases reveal significant differences, above all regarding the far right's unequal capacity to establish hegemony. To make sense of these divergent patterns, we examine how far-right discourse engaged with distinct social, ethno-racial, and regional cleavages. Drawing on a spatial conception of the far right as discursive coalitions united against common enemies, we argue that while Camacho linked anti-Masismo to a regionalist appeal – thereby alienating the Indigenous majority and confining his base to eastern Bolivia – Bolsonaro framed anti-petismo in ways that resonated with diverse groups on a national scale.

Keywords: Far right; political discourse; Brazil; Bolivia; Latin America.

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Introduction

Recent research on the rise of a new far right in Latin America identifies Jair Bolsonaro's election in October 2018 as a pivotal milestone in the spread of this phenomenon across the continent (BOHOSLAVSKY and BROQUETAS, 2024; KALTWASSER, 2023; VARGAS-MAIA and PINHEIRO-MACHADO, 2023). Yet well before the emergence of Bolsonaro in Brazil, José Antonio Kast in Chile, and Javier Milei in Argentina, a radical right-wing movement had already taken shape in Bolivia – specifically in the department of Santa Cruz¹. This movement, which exercised significant regional influence, mounted fierce opposition to the government of Evo Morales and the leftist Movement for Socialism (MAS) (BOWEN, 2014; EATON, 2007). At the time, however, it remained relatively isolated within a Latin American landscape still dominated by progressive governments associated with the so-called 'pink tide'². That dynamic changed dramatically with Bolsonaro's electoral victory, which amplified the far right's political influence and encouraged closer collaboration among far-right leaders and organizations across the region.

This article offers a comparative analysis of the ideological profiles of the far right in Bolivia and Brazil between 2016 and 2023, drawing on both empirical sources and existing scholarship³. Our focus is on the leading figures of the far-right landscape in each country: Luis Fernando Camacho, governor of Santa Cruz from 2021 to 2022, and Jair Bolsonaro, president of Brazil from 2019 to 2023. We selected these cases and this timeframe because both societies underwent a similar sequence of political developments during this period: the crisis of progressive governments, the rise of far-right leadership, and the subsequent return of progressives to power. At the same time, as the article demonstrates, the Bolivian and Brazilian cases also reveal significant differences – most notably the far right's uneven capacity to establish national hegemony, which has remained far more limited in the Andean country than in Brazil (MARTUSCELLI and CAVALCANTE, 2023).

¹According to the National Institute of Statistics (INE), the department of Santa Cruz has an estimated population of 3.3 million. In 2022, the department's GDP represented 30.66% of Bolivia's total GDP (approximately US\$44 billion), and is notable for its agro-industrial, livestock, and hydrocarbon sectors. Soybean cultivation alone occupies 70% of the department's arable land. The capital, Santa Cruz de la Sierra, has emerged as Bolivia's primary agro-industrial, commercial, and financial hub (LAVAUD, 1998; PRADO, 2007; SANDOVAL, 2003).

²The term 'pink tide' likely first appeared in academic literature in the work of Panizza (2006). For analyses of the right-wing reaction to the 'pink tide' governments across the continent, see Domínguez, Lievesley, and Lodlam (2011).

³The reader will note that the section on Bolivia is considerably more extensive than that on Brazil. This discrepancy reflects both the limited availability of international literature on Bolivia and the relative unfamiliarity of much of the Brazilian academic audience with the Andean country, which requires a more detailed contextual reconstruction.

To account for these divergent patterns, we analyze how the discourse of these movements engaged the social, ethno-racial, and regional cleavages that structure both societies. We hypothesize that while Camacho – by combining anti-Masismo with a regionalist appeal – alienated the Indigenous majority and confined his support to eastern Bolivia, Bolsonaro – by centering his discourse on anti-petismo – was able to resonate with diverse groups on a national scale. Building on a spatial conception of the far right (IGNAZI, 2003) as a ‘family of resemblances’, in which different political languages converge to form ‘discursive coalitions’ opposing common enemies (BIANCHI and KAYSEL, 2024), we also draw on the notion of ‘neo-patriot’ right-wing movements (SANAHUJA and BURIAN, 2023). To examine the scope and limits of how far-right actors construct the ‘imagined national community’⁴ in two very different South American contexts.

The ‘New Far Right’ in debate

The first two decades of the twenty-first century have witnessed a volatile mix of crises of representation and the rise of political, cultural, and intellectual movements associated with the far right. The impact of this phenomenon has varied across countries and regions. In some cases, the far right has come to power – as in Hungary, Poland, Italy, the United States, Brazil, Argentina, El Salvador, and Austria. In others, it has emerged as a powerful opposition force, as in France, Spain, Portugal, and Chile, among others (FORTI, 2024; MUDDE, 2021). As Beatriz Ugarte (2021) observes, the spectacular electoral growth of this ideological family has been accompanied by a surge in academic production, making the study of the far right one of the most productive areas of research in political science. The resurgence of the far right has become one of the defining features of our time (TRAVERSO, 2021). At the same time, however, the very definition of this phenomenon has sparked major debates within the social sciences, and political science in particular.

As with any typology, definitions vary depending on the author’s theoretical and methodological approach. Cas Mudde (2021) notes that there is no scholarly consensus on the most appropriate terms to describe either the phenomenon as a whole or its subgroups. He traces how terminology has shifted since the postwar era, when such parties and movements were categorized as ‘neofascist’. In the 1980s, the label ‘far right’ became common; in the 1990s, it was largely replaced by ‘radical right’; in the first decade of the twenty-first century, by ‘right-wing populism’; and in more recent years, by ‘ultra-right’. This variation reflects the wide spectrum of parties and movements involved – some openly neo-Nazi or neofascist, others fully integrated into

⁴The concept evidently draws on Benedict Anderson’s definition of the nation as a community imagined as ‘sovereign’, ‘limited’, and ‘horizontal’ (ANDERSON, 1993, p. 25).

institutional politics and liberal representative democracy. Below, we provide a brief overview of some of these interpretations.

One of the most influential typologies is offered by political scientist Piero Ignazi (1992). Who distinguishes between the 'traditional' or 'old' far right, and the 'post-industrial' or 'new' far right. The traditional far right encompasses organizations that maintain ideological ties to fascist or proto-Nazi movements of the interwar period, advancing radical goals and explicitly anti-democratic proposals. Starting in the 1980s, these organizations gradually became marginal, giving way to the post-industrial far right – formations that explicitly reject any association with Nazi or fascist regimes.

Cas Mudde (2021) proposed a second typology, also distinguishing between two types: the 'populist radical right' and the far right. The key – and by no means minor – difference lies in their approach to democracy: the former participates formally in elections, even while contesting certain core values of liberal democracy, whereas the latter rejects democracy altogether (MUDDE, 2021).

The search for a precise definition has led scholars to revisit the concepts of fascism and neofascism. However, the widespread and sometimes casual use of these terms has generated considerable debate, controversy, and criticism among researchers (BIANCHI and MELO, 2023; FORTI, 2024). Enzo Traverso (2021) argues that although applying the concept of fascism may be problematic, it remains indispensable for understanding this emerging reality. He characterizes the current period as one of post-fascism, emphasizing its chronological specificity and situating it within a historical sequence marked by both continuity and transformation. This focus on change and transience is crucial for analyzing the far-right phenomenon in the twenty-first century. In contrast, historian Steven Forti (2024) contends that the use of the terms fascism and post-fascism can be misleading, since the fascism that emerged in Europe after World War I displayed features largely absent in contemporary far-right movements – such as organized combat squads, totalitarian governance, imperialist military ambitions, mass mobilization of the population, and self-representation as a revolutionary movement.

The recent rise of right-wing and far-right movements in Latin America has generated a substantial body of empirical research, particularly through edited volumes offering comparative perspectives on different national cases. Not only within the region but also including experiences from other parts of the world, both in the Global North and the Global South (BOHOSLAVSKY and BROQUETAS, 2024; BOLCATTO and SOUROUJON, 2020; KALTWASSER, 2023; SANAHUJA and STEFANONI, 2023; VARGAS-MAIA and PINHEIRO-MACHADO, 2023). Yet there remains a notable lack of theoretical and conceptual

frameworks capable of capturing the historical specificity of Latin American far-right movements. It is important to note that the main analytical tools and conceptual distinctions cited above – such as Mudde’s differentiation between the ‘extreme right’ and the ‘populist radical right’ within the broader ultra-right spectrum (MUDDE, 2021), or Traverso’s distinction between ‘neofascism’ and ‘post-fascism’ (TRAVERSO, 2021) – draw heavily on European political experiences of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

Some exceptions have sought to classify the far-right spectrum beyond European cases, accounting for the phenomenon in both the Global North and South. Notably, José Antonio Sanahuja and Camilo López Burian (2023) propose the concept of ‘neo-patriot’ right-wing movements, which they describe as promoting a ‘sovereignist’ and homogenizing vision of the nation that opposes both external ‘globalism’ and internal diversity – whether represented by immigration in Europe and the United States or by Indigenous populations and ‘plurinationality’ in Latin America. Because the construction of national identities by new far-right movements plays a central role in our argument, we draw on this concept to guide our comparison of the discursive formations analyzed here, to which we return later. At the same time, defining these movements as ‘neo-patriot’ does not fully capture the diversity of the phenomenon, underscoring the need for a conceptualization of the far right that reflects its constitutive heterogeneity.

Within this framework, we approach the far right as a spatial concept and, therefore, an eminently relational one, a space where different ideological and discursive traditions converge (IGNAZI, 2003). These political languages often coalesce into ‘discursive coalitions’, typically organized around ‘anti-’ discourses – anti-communist, anti-feminist, anti-liberal, anti-democratic, and so forth – defined in opposition to perceived ideological enemies (BIANCHI and KAYSEL and, 2024, p. 10). In the two sections that follow, we examine how the Bolivian and Brazilian far right, under the leadership of Camacho and Bolsonaro, articulated distinct ideological traditions through their antagonism toward the MAS and the PT, albeit with markedly different outcomes in terms of the national reach of their discursive coalitions.

Cambas⁵ versus Collas⁶: regionalism as a Far-Right discourse in the Bolivian/Cruceño Far Right

Jair Bolsonaro's election paved the way for a fruitful collaboration between Brazil's government and the Latin American far right. The first major initiative occurred in December 2018, with the Conservative Summit of the Americas held in Foz do Iguazu (Paraná). Among the invited guests was the Croatian-Bolivian businessman Branko Marincovic⁷, introduced by the event's host and organizer – federal deputy Eduardo Bolsonaro – as the 'greatest enemy of Evo Morales'⁸. A few months later, another Santa Cruz businessman, Luis Fernando Camacho, was received in Brazil by then-Foreign Minister Ernesto Araújo and presidential international affairs advisor Filipe Martins⁹.

Marincovic and Camacho shared several traits: both hail from traditional elite families in the department of Santa Cruz, both previously served as presidents of the Pro-Santa Cruz Committee (CPSC)¹⁰, and both emerged as leaders of the Cruceño regionalist movement, which positioned itself in fierce opposition to

⁵According to the 'Cruceño Encyclopedic Dictionary', the term 'Camba' was originally used by the Chiriguano Indigenous people as an affectionate form of address, and many residents of Santa Cruz continue to claim that 'Camba' means 'friend' in Guaraní. However, the term has historically carried a derogatory connotation. In the nineteenth century, 'Camba' was synonymous with 'barbarian' and was generally applied to peasants, manual laborers, and mestizo workers. Today, the word 'Camba' designates the inhabitants of eastern Bolivia, distinguishing them from the 'Colla'. Broadly speaking, 'Camba' and 'Colla' function as geographic and cultural labels for the peoples of eastern (Camba) and western Bolivia (Colla), both of which encompass considerable ethnic diversity (BOSCHETTI and CLAROS, 2008).

⁶The term 'Colla' – which today exists in opposition to 'Camba' – originates in the pre-Columbian distribution and social differentiation of the region. Specifically, 'Colla' derives from 'Collasuyo', one of the four sectors (districts) of the Inca Empire, roughly corresponding to the present-day Andean region of Bolivia. Today, the term 'Colla' refers to those from the highlands, primarily the Aymara and Quechua peoples. The opposition between 'Camba' and 'Colla' reflects the deep and often violent crisis facing the country, shaped by political and economic factors and expressed in a persistent antagonism between the western highlands (Andean, altiplanic) and the eastern lowlands (SOUCHAUD and BAENINGER, 2008).

⁷The Marinković family emigrated to the Bolivian province of Santa Cruz in the mid-1950s. Through a successful agricultural enterprise, they became one of the wealthiest and most influential families in Bolivia. Branko Marinković, often referred to as the 'soybean king', was a staunch opponent of the Morales government's nationalization policies and its approach to land distribution. In 2007, he assumed the presidency of the Pro Santa Cruz Civic Committee, leading mobilizations against the Morales government and advocating for departmental 'autonomy'. In 2010, he went into exile in Brazil, where he received political refugee status during the administration of Michel Temer. He returned to Bolivia shortly after President Evo Morales's forced 'resignation' in November 2019 and was appointed Minister of Planning, later assuming the Ministry of Economy under the government of Jeanine Áñez. Available at <<https://outraspalavras.net/outrasmidias/bolivia-as-possiveis-digitais-brasileiras-no-golpe/>>.

⁸Bolivianos en el exilio. Exiliado boliviano Branko Marinkovic: "Bolivia es un narcoestado". YouTube, January 03, 2019. Available at <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=p4hR3VSJhdo>>. Accessed on August 01, 2024.

⁹Molina, Fernando. Camacho, o líder dos protestos na Bolívia que quer "devolver a Deus o Palácio do Governo". El País, La Paz, November 11, 2019. Internacional. Available at <https://brasil.elpais.com/brasil/2019/11/11/internacional/1573488689_493218.html>. Accessed on August 01, 2024.

¹⁰The Pro-Santa Cruz Committee was founded in October 1950 at the initiative of the Local University Federation (FUL) of Gabriel René Moreno University, which was then led by members of the Bolivian Socialist Falange (FSB), a far-right nationalist party with strong Catholic and conservative traditions. Today, the Pro-Santa Cruz Committee comprises approximately 220 affiliated institutions (LACOMBE, 2007).

Evo Morales's government between 2006 and 2019. Over time, both men also weaved transnational support networks and forged ties with regional and global far-right actors through active participation in international forums and events, such as the aforementioned 2018 Conservative Summit, the Madrid Forum in 2023¹¹, and various editions of the Conservative Political Action Conference (CPAC)¹².

The Cruceño regionalist movement is structured through several civil society institutions, the most prominent being the previously mentioned Comité Pro Santa Cruz (CPSC), along with its student wing, the Unión Juvenil Cruceñista (UJC)¹³, and the women's organization Comité Cívico Femenino (CCF). These institutions maintain strong ties to Santa Cruz's economic and political elites and are capable of disseminating a powerful regionalist discourse across diverse sectors and strata of civil society. Centered on a Camba-Cruceño identity that is culturally 'distinct', 'opposed to', and at times even 'superior' to the rest of the country, forming a kind of 'ethno-regionalist' movement comparable to the Italian far-right party, the Northern League (now simply 'Lega') (FORTI, 2022) – a parallel we return to in the concluding section of this article.

According to Anders Bergholdt (1999), in a compelling study on the construction of cultural identity in Santa Cruz, radical factions and influential forces within these organizations oppose immigration from the Bolivian highlands, fearing a perceived 'invasion' of Colla Indigenous people and the erosion of the Camba-Cruceño cultural identity. This identity, in contrast to the 'Colla' identity, is rooted in a Christian, modern, and European cosmology, with strong conservative and traditionalist elements, and is expressed in the

¹¹The II Madrid Forum took place in Lima, Peru, from March 29 to 30, 2023. The Forum, an initiative of 'Fundación Disenso', is affiliated with the Spanish far-right party VOX. Bolivia was represented at the meeting by Stello Cochamanidis, vice president of the Pro-Santa Cruz Committee. In a statement, the Committee: "...denounced the existence of more than 234 political prisoners of the MAS regime in Bolivia [...]. During his address to 800 participants, the Cruceño civic representative emphasized that the Pro-Santa Cruz Committee is the only institution in Bolivia that could not be infiltrated by MAS and that it stands as the last bastion in defense of the Bolivian people." Available at <<https://www.comiteprosantacruz.org.bo/denuncia-persecucion-politica-en-bolivia/>>.

¹²The Conservative Political Action Conference (CPAC) is a gathering of global conservatives. First launched in 1974, CPAC brings together conservative organizations and leaders from around the world. The inaugural CPAC Brazil was held on October 11–12, 2019, in São Paulo. The second edition took place on September 03–04, 2021, in Brasília, followed by a third edition in Campinas, São Paulo. The fourth CPAC Brazil was held on September 23–24, 2023, in Belo Horizonte, and the fifth edition on July 06–07, 2024, in Balneário Camboriú. Participants in the 2024 edition included former Brazilian president Jair Bolsonaro, current Argentine president Javier Milei, Chilean far-right leader José Antonio Kast, and Branko Marinkovic, Croatian-Bolivian businessman and former president of the Pro-Santa Cruz Committee (Available at <<https://cpacbr.com.br/>>).

¹³On October 07, 1957, the Santa Cruz Youth Union (UJC) was founded as the 'armed wing' of the Civic Committee and the Falange. According to José Terrazas Velasco (1994), one of the UJC's founding members, the organization emerged with a dual purpose: "On the one hand, to actively support the leadership of the Pro-Santa Cruz Committee and, on the other, under the right to self-defense, to protect the civilian population from the constant abuses of the troops of Hernán Siles Zuazo's government" (VELASCO, 1994, p. 11). According to Santa Cruz historian Paula Peña Asbún et al.(2003), the UJC's role during the civic struggles over the 11% consisted of providing security for the people of Santa Cruz in the face of clashes with MNR militias.

Cruceño anthem: “Great Spain, with a benign destiny, planted here the sign of Redemption. And in its shadow emerged an eminent people, with a clear brow and a loyal heart” (LA PATRIA, 2013). Cruceños see themselves as direct descendants of the Spanish colonizers and perceive themselves as racially superior to the ‘semi-civilized Indians’ of the highlands. This identity is reinforced by intolerance, fear, and ignorance of the ‘other’, whether that other is the Colla Indigenous inhabitant of the western highlands or the ‘barbarian indigenous’ of the forests surrounding Santa Cruz. In this sense, Cruceñismo embodies a system of oppositions in which Indigenous people are systematically framed as anti-Cruceño (MIERTEBAU and RODRÍGUEZ, 2011). As Bergholdt (1999) notes:

Within the ideological discourse of “Cruceñismo,” Cruceñidad is defined as everything that is “non-Colla” [...]. Ideologically, Cruceñismo is primarily shaped by members of the dominant upper class. Most of these individuals participate in one or more of Santa Cruz’s informal networks, such as fraternities, comparsas, and secret societies, and some are also directly or indirectly involved with the Civic Committees (BERGHOLDT, 1999, pp. 151-152).

The discourse of ‘Cruceñidad’ and ‘Cruceñismo’ constitutes a defining feature of the regionalist movement and the Camba-Cruceño identity, serving to legitimize and consolidate the authority of the Civic Committee as the ‘moral government of the Cruceños’. This institution combines a traditionalist ideology with the promotion of local entrepreneurship, which is portrayed as a distinctive trait of the population (LAVAUD, 1998). From the 2000s onward, the movement embraced an ‘autonomist’ discourse as a political strategy, positioning regional belonging at the center of its agenda in opposition to the Indigenous movement, the Evo Morales government, and the ‘new’ Plurinational State (JORDÁN, 2016, 2011; CLAROS, 2009). The actions and political rhetoric of Cruceño regionalism are explicitly framed in racialized terms:

[...] Evo Morales was derogatorily referred to as an “índio de mierda” or a “llama de mierda.” Pamphlets distributed in Santa Cruz depicted the 2009 Constitution as the prelude to an Indigenous revolution in which the wealthy “Camba” department would be invaded by armies of “red ponchos” from the highlands, intent on seizing private property, dismantling civilized institutions, and carrying out the MAS government’s orders to transform the country into a vassal state of “communist” Venezuela (GOODALE, 2021, p. 53).

French researcher Zeline Lacombe (2007) argues that the regionalist phenomenon in Santa Cruz should be understood as a top-down movement, led by locally dominant economic actors such as the Federation of Private Entrepreneurs of Santa Cruz. Which encompasses the chambers of industry,

commerce, and agriculture, among others – and the Federation of Self-Employed Professionals, including the Schools of Physicians, Engineers, Architects, and Lawyers. This broad base of representation enabled Cruceño regionalism to construct a discourse capable of establishing and preserving the hegemony of these economic and political elites through a repertoire of myths, traditions, and cultural symbols.

The political discourse and rhetoric of Cruceño civic leaders Branko Marincovic and Luis Fernando Camacho focus primarily on the regionalist movement's demands for greater autonomy, federalism, or even outright independence. At the same time, they integrate these demands with cultural, moral, and economic agendas shared across the Bolivian and broader Latin American far right – such as appeals to Christian conservatism and Hispanism, the defense of landownership, and an anti-communist worldview expressed through anti-Bolivarianism, anti-Castroism, anti-MAS sentiment, and overt hostility toward Evo Morales himself (GOLDSTEIN, 2020). The political and ideological movement spearheaded by Camacho, which gained momentum between 2016 and 2019, even managed – albeit only temporarily – to transcend the confines of a strictly regionalist discourse. Camacho adeptly harnessed and channeled the 'democratic rebellion' of the urban middle classes against Morales's determination to run for a fourth presidential term in the October 20, 2019 elections, despite his defeat in the constitutional referendum of February 21, 2016. By appropriating the language of 'democracy', the Cruceño civic leader forged connections with middle-class youth as well as far-right paramilitary groups such as the UJC and the Cochala Youth Resistance (RJC)¹⁴, who felt unrepresented by the traditional Bolivian and Cruceño right¹⁵. To achieve this, he relied on a discursive strategy that demonized the Morales government, portraying it as 'anti-Christian' and 'satanic' for its embrace of Pachamama¹⁶ rituals and its reverence for Indigenous symbols such as the Wiphala¹⁷: "[...] there is a difference between what this government represents and what the Civic Committee stands for. They lack what we have in abundance – faith in God – and it is that faith which guides our every decision" (MONEY BOLIVIA, 2019). During the civic strike of November 04, 2019, Fernando Camacho, as the rally's main speaker, addressed the thousands gathered at the foot of the

¹⁴La fuerza de choque que asusta a Bolivia. ¿Qué es la Resistencia Juvenil Cochala? Página 12, February 10, 2020. Available at <<https://www.pagina12.com.ar/246636-que-es-la-resistencia-juvenil-cochala>>.

¹⁵Deheza, Pablo. El ascenso del conservadurismo radical. La Razon, Santa Cruz, May 26, 2024. Available at <<https://www.la-razon.com/politico/2024/05/26/el-ascenso-del-conservadurismo-radical/>>. Accessed on August 25, 2024.

¹⁶EM CERIMÔNIA INDÍGENA, Evo Morales agradece Pachamama por 10 anos de governo na Bolívia. Opera Mundi, January 21, 2016. Available at <<https://operamundi.uol.com.br/politica-e-economia/em-cerimonia-indigena-evo-morales-agradece-pachamama-por-10-anos-de-governo-na-bolivia/>>. Accessed on August 25, 2024.

¹⁷VIDIGAL, Lucas. Entenda o que é a wiphala e como a questão indígena na Bolívia acirrou a crise política no país. G1, November 15, 2019. Available at <<https://g1.globo.com/mundo/noticia/2019/11/15/entenda-o-que-e-a-wiphala-e-como-a-questao-indigena-na-bolivia-acirrou-a-crise-politica-no-pais.ghtml>>. Accessed on August 25, 2024.

Cristo Redentor statue in downtown Santa Cruz de la Sierra, calling for Evo Morales's resignation.

Tonight we must confront another tyrant who has shown disdain for the Bolivian people: Nicolás Maduro. We will make it clear that our people take no orders from Cuba, Venezuela, or the United States. [...] Our patience has run out. That is why the civic movement, together with national platforms, has decided to escalate the nationwide civic strike indefinitely. [...] Tomorrow I will personally deliver this resignation letter to the city of La Paz, so they know I am not coming with weapons but with faith and hope, holding a Bible in my right hand and the resignation letter in my left. [...] God will return to the Presidential Palace in the coming days, and that is why I am leaving tomorrow with faith that I will return to Santa Cruz carrying his signed resignation (CUIZA, 2019).

At the inauguration of interim President Jeanine Áñez on November 12, 2019, Camacho proclaimed himself the leader who had toppled President Evo Morales and returned the Bible to the palace: “We hoped the Bible would return to the palace, that we would have a democratic president, but above all, that peace would return to our country. Freedom has been restored. [...] This is the message we offer all Bolivians: the faith we place in God, the faith we place in our people, and the hope that we can build a new future together” (CNN, 2019).

The Cruceño leader's conservative, ultra-Catholic¹⁸ rhetoric thus assumed the form of a 'divine mandate' to expel 'communism' and “restore the Bible to the government palace” (GOLDSTEIN, 2020). As Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser (2024) notes, a defining trait of the 'new Latin American right' is its shift toward the politicization of sociocultural issues over socioeconomic concerns. This strategy, Rovira Kaltwasser argues (2024), seeks to mobilize not only the more affluent segments of society but also popular classes with conservative moral and religious convictions.

By deploying a potent blend of religious rhetoric and messianic imagery, Camacho cast himself as a kind of 'Bolivian Bolsonaro' (MIRANDA, 2019). Yet the far-right leader ultimately failed to extend his influence beyond the territorial stronghold of Santa Cruz or to consolidate a genuinely national discourse (DEHEZA, 2024). Just days before his arrest in late December 2022 for his role in the 2019 coup, the Santa Cruz governor endorsed a Civic Committee proposal – approved amid disputes over anticipating the national census¹⁹ – to reopen debate on the department's relationship with the Bolivian

¹⁸ANTUNES, Patu. Percebi pela mãe que ele odiava Evo, conta jornalista que morou com Camacho. Folha de São Paulo, November 12, 2019. Available at <<https://www1.folha.uol.com.br/mundo/2019/11/percebi-pela-mae-que-ele-odiava-evo-conta-jornalista-que-morou-com-camacho.shtml>>. Accessed on August 25, 2024.

¹⁹In 2022, the city of Santa Cruz went on strike for 36 days to demand that a national census be conducted in 2023, a demand that ultimately went unfulfilled. Civic leaders in the region voiced distrust in the census's

state, thereby reigniting longstanding disputes and controversies over Cruceño separatism.

We are closing out a remarkable year. A year in which Santa Cruz once again stepped forward, with resolve, to protect democracy and regional rights. We are the strongest region in Bolivia. Neither subjugation nor political persecution has managed to halt a joyful, productive, and hardworking Santa Cruz. Yet the most significant moment of the year was the decision taken at a large-scale *Cabildo* (an open assembly convened by the Civic Committee), where our people demanded a reassessment of our department's political relationship with the Bolivian state. Why? To finally put an end to this centralist plague that has long stifled regional development. That is why, in 2023, from Santa Cruz, we will advance the cause of federalism. We want a federalism that unites Bolivia [...] A federalism that compels MAS to respect our Camba way of life [...] To respect our green-white-green flag, our faith, our anthem, our identity [...] (BOLIVIA EN LAS NOTICIAS, 2022).

Here we confront the problem of the hegemonic weakness of Santa Cruz's dominant classes in the first two decades of the twenty-first century. Their political representation rested less on national parties than on regional interest groups such as the Pro-Santa Cruz Committee (CPSC). This dynamic did not change after the 2019 coup and was reflected in their inability to construct a sustainable alternative to power, thereby paving the way for MAS's victory in the 2020 elections (MARTUSCELLI and CAVALCANTE, 2023, pp. 06–07). In those elections, where Luis Arce won the presidency with 55.1% of the vote, the Cruceño leader chose not to support former president Carlos Mesa Gisbert, who came in second with 28%, but instead launched his own candidacy, which garnered only 14% (MARTUSCELLI and CAVALCANTE, 2023, p. 09). This localist, regionalist approach to politics prevented Camacho from building a national political project capable of challenging MAS. Nevertheless, he consolidated his role as Santa Cruz's leading political figure by winning the governorship of the department with 55.64% of the vote²⁰.

Thus, the new Cruceño far right, led by Camacho and Marinovic, sought to weave together diverse political and discursive strands, all deeply infused with a regionalist sentiment hostile to Indigenous majorities and the Plurinational State. It therefore lacked both the capacity and even the intent to transform its

transparency, fearing it could be manipulated to underreport Santa Cruz's population. In response, they organized their own 'regional census', which they claimed showed the city's population had reached four million. The government, however, rejected these figures, arguing that Santa Cruz had not conducted a census but rather a survey, an inadequate method for quantifying a population. Available at <<https://elpais.com/america/2024-03-22/bolivia-encara-un-censo-que-amenaza-con-inflamar-la-polarizacion-politica.html>>. Accessed on August 25, 2024.

²⁰CAMACHO GANÓ LA GOBERNACIÓN CRUCEÑA CON 55,64%. Los tiempos, March 15, 2021. Available at <<https://www.lostiempos.com/actualidad/pais/20210315/camacho-gano-gobernacion-crucena-5564>>. Accessed on October 01, 2024.

political project into a truly national movement, except temporarily and under specific circumstances. This represents a crucial distinction from Bolsonarism, which successfully nationalized itself and became the dominant force within the broader right, as will be examined in the following section.

Brazil above all: patriotism as the discourse of the Brazilian Far Right

Despite the wide range of interpretations of Bolsonarism as a phenomenon, there is relative consensus that understanding Jair Bolsonaro's 2018 victory – and the consolidation of Bolsonarism as a far-right mass movement. Requires tracing back to the events surrounding the removal of former President Dilma Rousseff, from the second round of the 2014 elections to the completion of the impeachment process in 2016. Santos and Tanscheit (2019), for instance, argue that in leading the impeachment process, the traditional liberal-conservative right inadvertently paved the way for its own displacement by a set of more radical right-wing forces. These forces later coalesced around Bolsonaro's 2018 candidacy, marking the transition from the traditional center-right to what the authors term the 'new right' in Brazil's political landscape.

Examining the same period through a Marxist lens centered on the relationship between the state and social classes, Martuscelli and Cavalcante (2023, p. 14) interpret Rousseff's removal as a new type of coup d'état – a framework that also applies to the later Bolivian case. They argue that, in order to depose the PT government, bourgeois factions with ties to financial capital needed to spur a process of social mobilization, primarily drawing on the middle class and petty bourgeoisie. This dynamic, they contend, paved the way for what they describe as a 'reactionary mass movement with neofascist tendencies', which ultimately found political expression in Bolsonaro's leadership. According to the authors, this movement fused 'neoliberal reason', grounded in the defense of unrestricted property rights, with reactionary agendas that rejected the recognition of gender, racial, and sexual diversity while promoting a homogenized notion of the 'people-nation'. This ideological synthesis, they argue, was essential in enabling the movement to extend beyond the middle classes that had initially supported it and to gain traction among sectors of the subordinate classes (MARTUSCELLI and CAVALCANTE, 2023, p. 15).

The characterization of Bolsonarism as 'neofascist', following Boito Jr. (2020), remains contentious even within Marxist debates, given the substantial differences between the historical conditions and experiences of classical fascism and those of the contemporary far right. As noted above, some scholars – while recognizing continuities between contemporary far-right

movements and their interwar predecessors – prefer broader terms such as ‘post-fascism’ (TRAVERSO, 2021). Yet such labels do not fully resolve the problem, since the prefix ‘post’- inevitably carries a negative, derivative connotation.

In Brazilian political science, most analyses of Bolsonarism have relied on some variant of the concept of populism as their central analytical framework. Rennó, Avritzer, and Carvalho (2021) describe Bolsonarism as right-wing populism, a view shared by Silva and Rodrigues (2021). Bülow and Aber (2022) characterize it as a form of ‘radical-right’ populism; Couto (2023) frames it as religious populism; Mendonça and Caetano (2021) situate it within the global trend of far-right populism; and Lynch and Cassimiro (2022) propose ‘reactionary populism’ as an analytical tool. The difficulty with this proliferation of labels lies in the concept itself, which is either overburdened with normative assumptions and excessive vagueness. Or reduced to overly formalistic definitions that fail to capture concrete, real-world dynamics (CRUZ and CHALOUB, 2021).

It would be impossible for us, within the scope of this article, to fully engage with the debate over whether Bolsonarism is best classified as ‘neofascist’, ‘post-fascist’, or ‘populist’. An alternative perspective, offered by Chaloub (2023) in his analysis of the geopolitical imaginaries of the Brazilian far right, frames this ideological field as a space where three distinct political languages converge: 01. the reactionary, represented by figures such as the ideologue Olavo de Carvalho and former Foreign Minister Ernesto Araújo; 02. the ultraliberal, embodied by former Economy Minister Paulo Guedes; and the 03. conservative-authoritarian, advanced by military leaders such as General Eduardo Villas-Boas.

Drawing on the ‘spatial’ conception of the far right, as noted above, Bianchi and Kaysel (2024, pp. 13–14) define Bolsonarism as a ‘discursive coalition’ composed of four ideological strands: 01. neofascism, expressed both through neo-integralist groups²¹ and the ‘metapolitical fascism’ of the Olavista movement²²; 02. ultraliberalism, represented by Paulo Guedes and other proponents of radicalized neoliberalism; 03. Christian conservatism, encompassing evangelicals such as former Minister Damares Alves and

²¹It is worth recalling that the former president himself adopted the motto ‘God, Country, Family, and Freedom’, closely echoing the integralist slogan of the 1930s, ‘God, Country, and Family’. On the presence of explicitly neo-integralist groups within the broader Bolsonarist movement, see Gonçalves and Caldeira Neto (2020).

²²The classification of Olavo de Carvalho as a neo-fascist remains contested. Benjamin Teitelbaum (2020) argues that his intellectual influences – such as René Guénon and Julius Evola – cannot be considered strictly fascist, even though they maintained ties to Italian fascism or German Nazism in the 1930s. Teitelbaum (2020) instead situates them within the tradition of ‘traditionalism’. By contrast, historian Roger Griffin (2000), in his analysis of Alain de Benoist and the French ‘nouvelle droite’, contends that these same ideological traditions may be understood as a form of ‘metapolitical fascism’, particularly because of their emphasis on a ‘cultural renaissance’.

Catholics like her advisor Ângela Gandra; and, finally, 04. military authoritarianism, promoted by generals such as Villas-Boas and Walter Braga Neto. These ideological strands converged around a shared antagonism to a common enemy, articulated through anti-communism (BIANCHI and KAYSEL, 2024, p. 15), which in contemporary terms translates into anti-Workers' Party (PT) sentiment. In this sense, Bolsonaroism ties into a long-standing discursive tradition within the Brazilian right, while adapting it to a new historical context (MOTTA, 2019).

Examining the role of anti-communism in the discursive formation of Bolsonaroism, Daniel de Mendonça (2023, p. 325) contends that the signifier 'communism' functions as a marker of antagonism or negation across all dimensions articulated within Bolsonaroism's chain of equivalences: religion and the Christian family, individual freedom, and patriotism/nationalism. Within this framework, Bolsonaroism presents itself as standing up for the 'Christian family' against 'atheist communism', protecting personal liberty from 'communist totalitarianism', and ultimately safeguarding national identity and symbols from perceived threats – epitomized in the slogan, "Our flag will never be red" (MENDONÇA, 2023, p. 325).

This latter aspect is particularly significant. The right's appropriation of national symbols – most famously the Brazil national football team jersey – predates and helped shape the rise of Bolsonaroism. Alonso and Misch (2017) identify what they term a 'patriotic repertoire' as a mobilization tool already present during the 2013 popular protests, which became dominant during the impeachment demonstrations of 2015–2016. Equally important, however, is that Bolsonaro's leadership introduced cohesion and organic structure to this political field, which had previously lacked both, transforming it into a potentially viable electoral alternative to the traditional right.

Returning to the definition proposed by Martuscelli and Cavalcante (2023, p. 13), Bolsonaroism positions itself as a defender of the unity and integrity of the 'people-nation', perceived as threatened by the policies of the left during the PT governments. The centrality of this 'patriotic' axis – or, in Mendonça's (2023, p. 319) terms, the 'nationalist-militarist' dimension of Bolsonaroist discourse – emerges even years before Bolsonaro's first presidential victory, as reflected by in the widely cited public declaration of his intended vote during the impeachment process of Dilma Rousseff:

They lost in '64. They lost again in 2016. In the name of the family, for the innocence of children in the classroom – something the PT never respected. Against communism, for our freedom, against the São Paulo Forum. In memory of Colonel Carlos Alberto Brilhante Ulstra, Dilma Rousseff's nightmare (applause from the plenary). (...) For the Army of

Caxias, for our Armed Forces, for a Brazil above all, and God above everyone, my vote is yes! (BRASIL, 2018).

At its core, the invocation of the legacy of the military dictatorship – including its darkest repressive dimensions – and the appeal to the ‘Army of Caxias’ reflect what historian Manuel Domingos Neto (2019) termed ‘military patriotism’. The identification of the military’s corporate interests with those of the nation, which is conceived as needing guidance and shaping in the image and values of the Armed Forces. While military corporatism defined the early political trajectory of Congressman Jair Bolsonaro, by this stage his rhetoric had already incorporated additional elements – evident in his appeals to ‘the innocence of children in the classroom’ and references to God – expanding a broader chain of equivalences that enabled him to reach far beyond his original electoral base (SILVA, 2023). Less than three years later, upon assuming the presidency, Bolsonaro addressed the public from the speaker’s platform at the Presidential Palace, framing the historical significance of the moment as follows: “With humility and honor, I address all of you as President of Brazil, standing before the nation on this day, a day when the people began to liberate themselves from socialism, the inversion of values, the bloated state, and political correctness”(ZERO HORA, 2019).

At the same inauguration ceremony, addressing the National Congress, the new President outlined what he saw as the core mission of his administration: “We will unite the people, uphold the family, respect religions and our Judeo-Christian tradition, combat gender ideology, and preserve our values. Brazil will once again be a nation free from ideological constraints” (O ANTAGONISTA, 2019).

In this framing, Bolsonaro positioned himself as the defender of a unified ‘people’, tasked with ‘upholding the family’ and preserving ‘our Judeo-Christian heritage’, explicitly contrasting these values with ‘gender ideology’, associated with feminism, and with ‘ideological constraints’, implicitly understood as foreign or anti-national. The notion of a cohesive ‘people-nation’ resisting artificial divisions, purportedly promoted by the left, remained a recurring motif throughout his presidency, as seen in his speech launching his re-election campaign at the Liberal Party (PL) convention in Rio de Janeiro on July 24, 2022:

(...) we live in a wonderful country, a fantastic country, fully miscegenated. The current president does not seek to divide to win. I do not separate whites and blacks, homosexuals and heterosexuals, Northeasterners and Southerners, men and women. This is a government for all 215 million Brazilians. We all want the same things. We know the other side relies on malice, lies, and empty promises. We stand with reality, no matter the cost, even if it means speaking harsh truths (PODER360, 2022a).

This rhetoric presents a full-fledged jingoistic vision of a ‘wonderful country’, ‘fully miscegenated’, in which racial, gender, social, or regional conflicts supposedly have no place, while the ‘other side’ is implicitly held responsible for creating such divisions through ‘malice’ and ‘lies’. Within this narrative, the ‘others’ of the nation – whom Bolsonaro identified as “red marginal” to be “banished forever from our homeland” (PODER360, 2018) in a phone address to demonstrators on Avenida Paulista on October 21, 2018, just a week before the second round of the presidential election. Encompass all those perceived as threatening national unity: the Left, particularly the Workers’ Party (PT); feminists and the LGBTQIA+ movement, for challenging traditional family structures; and social movements such as the MST and MTST, for jeopardizing private property, among others. In short, the ‘other’ within the nation is constructed as the ‘internal enemy’, drawing on a key concept from the military regime’s ‘national security ideology’, which, as Comblin (1978, pp. 28–29) observes, relied on an “organicist vision of the nation”, equating the nation with state power and, ultimately, the Armed Forces themselves. Unlike the military dictatorship, however, a defining feature of Bolsonarism is its capacity to actively mobilize supporters, as seen in the following excerpt from his previously cited reelection campaign speech, in which he called on his followers to participate in the September 07 demonstrations targeting the Supreme Federal Court (STF): “I call on all of you to take to the streets on September 07, one final time. Let’s take the streets one last time! Those few deaf judges in black robes need to hear the voice of the people. They must understand that it is the Executive and Legislative branches that make the law. Everyone must play within the four lines of the Constitution; it is in everyone’s interests” (PODER360, 2022b).

Thus, by appealing to the mobilization of a heterogeneous social base – even if primarily concentrated among the middle classes – Bolsonarism constitutes, returning to the words of Martuscelli and Cavalcante (2023), a ‘reactionary mass movement’, making it one of the most fully developed expressions of the contemporary far right on the international stage. Central to this has been the reshaping of a particular vision of the ‘imagined community’, combining military-style patriotism with other discursive appeals – such as the ‘Christian family’ and individual ‘freedom’. This vision has played, and continues to play, a central role in enabling millions of Brazilians to see themselves as part of an ‘authentic’ people-nation, from which many fellow citizens are excluded and cast as ‘anti-patriotic’.

Concluding remarks

The movements led by Luís Fernando Camacho and Jair Bolsonaro stand as the most fully developed expressions of the new far right in Bolivia and Brazil, respectively. Both emerged from processes that destabilized and challenged

the democratic order in their countries between 2016 and 2023, positioning themselves simultaneously as the most radical challengers to progressive governments – the MAS and the PT – and as alternatives to the traditional right, which allegedly failed to push the confrontation with the left to its limits. In this regard, both the former governor of Santa Cruz and the former president of Brazil combined extremist political rhetoric with mobilizing practices, forging mass reactionary movements with fundamentally disruptive ambitions.

Ideologically, both the far right in Santa Cruz, organized through the Pro-Santa Cruz Committee (CPSC), and Bolsonarism are marked by a blend of different political languages or traditions – neofascism, ultraliberalism, and Christian conservatism, whether Catholic or Evangelical – interwoven around a revitalized anti-communist discourse. Moreover, both movements also advanced homogenizing visions of their respective imagined communities, excluding segments of the Bolivian or Brazilian populations framed as an ‘internal enemy’, thereby denying the inherent diversity of the people-nation.

If this last trait could qualify both leaders as legitimate representatives of the ‘neo-patriotic’ right, as defined by Sanahuja and Burián (2023), it is also where the key differences between them become evident. As discussed in the preceding sections, the ‘imagined community’ that Camachism seeks to represent is the ‘Camba nation’, associated with the department of Santa Cruz and Bolivia’s eastern region, whereas Bolsonarism positions itself as the representative of ‘Brazil above all’, embodying the green-and-yellow people-nation as a unified and indivisible entity.

In this sense, while anti-communism functions as the shared ideological marker identifying the ‘other’ within these discursive coalitions, this constructed alterity takes markedly different forms in each context. In Bolivia, the divide between Cambas and Collas explicitly emphasizes the ethnic, racial, and regional fractures that have historically shaped the country. In Brazil, by contrast, the notion of a ‘fully miscegenated’ people enacts the opposite strategy: denying the existence of such conflicts and dismissing them mere fabrications concocted by the unpatriotic left.

It is worth revisiting the earlier parallel between Cruceño regionalism and that of Northern Italy. As Steven Forti (2022) notes, the former Northern League, which began as a regionalist and separatist force, eventually underwent a process of nationalization – going as far as renaming itself simply the League – to secure electoral support in southern Italy. Nothing comparable, however, occurred in Bolivia, where the far right in Santa Cruz continued to antagonize the country’s western regions. The movement organized through the CPSC and embodied in Camacho’s leadership thus represents a form of regionalism that

explicitly rejects nationalization, except briefly and contingently between 2016 and 2019, since any such move would require some recognition of the paradigms of plurinationalism and Andean identity – something fundamentally incompatible with its core premises.

In sum, the discourse of Cruceñidad modernizes the ideological framework of the Bolivian far right while maintaining some continuity with historical Falangism (the far-right organization Falange Socialista Boliviana)²³ and Banzerism²⁴. The clear connections between these movements and Cruceño regionalism gave rise, in the early decades of the twenty-first century, to an ‘ideological symbiosis’ expressed diffusely by way of a ‘Cruceño Neofalangism’. Unlike historical Falangism and Banzerism, which relied primarily on extreme nationalism, corporatism, and the nationalist discourse of Bolivianidad – embodied in the motto ‘God, Homeland, and Family’ – Cruceño Neofalangism incorporates three new political languages: neoliberal anti-statism, anti-Colla indigenism, and regionalist ideology (ROCHA, 2024).

In Brazil, where policies recognizing racial, gender, and sexual diversity – pushed by social movements and enacted during the PT administrations – challenged the social imaginary of a ‘people-nation’ forged through miscegenation. The far right responded by reaffirming a form of ‘military patriotism’, rooted in authoritarian militarism and combined with neofascism, ultraliberalism, and Christian conservatism, effectively reasserting the notion of a homogeneous nation. These contrasting conceptions of the nation within the far right are crucial to understanding their uneven capacity for hegemony in the two contexts. While Camacho – currently imprisoned for his role in the 2019 coup – commands little support beyond Santa Cruz, Bolsonaro, though ineligible for office, continues to be a decisive force in Brazilian political life.

Translated by Paulo Scarpa.

²³The Bolivian Socialist Falange (FSB) is a political party founded on August 15, 1937, by university students inspired by Spanish Falangism. Its main ideologue and political leader, Óscar Únzaga de la Vega, died during an armed uprising against the MNR government on April 19, 1959. The circumstances of his death remain highly controversial. His followers claim he was assassinated by militias of the MNR Political Command, while the Siles Zuazo government maintained that he committed suicide. Thereafter, the Falange came under the leadership of the Crucenian Mario Gutiérrez, who headed the party until his death in 1980. The FSB combined a nationalist mystique with a strong corporatist, Catholic-traditionalist, anti-communist, and authoritarian ideology, adopting the motto ‘God, Homeland, and Family’. After the 1952 National Revolution, it became the main opposition party to the MNR governments. In 1971, it supported the far-right military coup led by Colonel Hugo Banzer (DOMICH, 1978).

²⁴BRETEL, Julio Peñaloza . El día en que el banzerismo derrocó a Evo Morales. La Razon, La Paz, August 29, 2021. Available at <<https://www.la-razon.com/tr-en-la-memoria/2021/08/29/el-dia-en-que-el-banzerismo-derroco-a-evo-morales/>>. Accessed on January 09, 2025.

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