

# “Gender Ideology,” Refeudalization, and the Reproductive Reconquista: A (G)local Perspective

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The expansion of extremely conservative social and political movements has gained attention in recent years. However, this sociopolitical phenomenon is not new. In certain aspects, it has been gestating for more than fifty years, particularly with the rise of the Christian Right in the United States and the instrumentalization of religious narratives and emotions for geopolitical purposes. At the same time, other facets of the new right in Latin America have deeper historical roots that can be traced to persisting colonialist projects.

Different terms have been used to describe these movements: neo-conservatism, anti-rights movements, anti-globalization movements, ethno-nationalisms, left- and right-wing populism, among others. A more productive way to name this phenomenon, though, is *refeudalization* (which I define later).

In the global context of extreme right-wing and neoconservative assemblages, a particular phrase has been deployed by neoconservative and right-wing leaders in Latin America and some European countries and with extraordinary success: *gender ideology*.<sup>1</sup> The literature analyzing this term, its origins, and its meanings has grown impressively during the past few years.

In this article, I present a different way of looking at and understanding the broader picture behind the emergence of this concept, one based on how neoconservative movements have been developing in the United States, Latin America, and some European countries over the past 20 to 30 years, and drawing on empirical research and reports. My purpose is to center reproductive politics in the analysis while recognizing that there are important elements that feminist approaches to the study of neoconservatism have largely ignored. In this piece, I try to connect complementing frameworks through what I call the *reproductive Reconquista*.

## The reproductive Reconquista

The reproductive Reconquista is the common drive, inspired by a romanticized Christian sense of destiny, honor, belonging, order, and certainty, that has stirred an assemblage of diverse conservative political movements across different regional and cultural contexts, in a quest to defend what they believe to be the good society. Their vision of a good society demands that the state be rooted in Christian moral and political commitments. They believe this project of society is under attack on at least two fronts. The first is political globalization, which is imposing narratives of international human rights, thereby jeopardizing national sovereignty and tradition. The second is the cultural front, where

<sup>1</sup> This is not exclusively of the right: left-wing political leaders have also made use of this rhetorical device. In fact, a leftist president, Rafael Correa, was the first president in Latin America to ever use the term in a public statement. However, despite the affinity some on the left might feel toward the narrative, it is mainly associated with right-wing conservative political strategies.

contemporary progressive social movements, such as antiracist, feminist, LGBTQ, and migrant movements, among others, are undermining the sacred structure of the family.

At the core of sociocultural conservative nostalgia is the traditional notion of family as the most fundamental basis of the good society they envision. From their point of view, this sacred, though secularized, conceptualization of family has been under constant attack for decades. Their mission is to reconquer the social, political, and symbolic spaces that they believe have been lost to the unyielding process of globalization, which, to them, is necessary to save not just the traditional sacred family but also, and even more importantly, the state and the nation.

To understand more clearly their motivations, I briefly describe what these groups perceive as the most relevant attacks they must confront. First was the sexual revolution and the feminist movement of the 1960s. In their view, the invention of contraceptives, the proclamation of sexual pleasure as independent of reproduction and marriage, and the secular education of children were all part of a carefully drafted plan to redefine what is a good society and what is a legitimate state.

Second was the gradual scientific and technological advances that facilitated human intervention and control in reproduction and sexuality. These groups have perceived this technoscientific development as a dangerous and disrespectful interference in the sacred order of things. All these scientific developments demonstrate, for them, the dangers of doing science without respecting the divine and the sacred.

Third, they began to perceive interventions of intergovernmental organizations such as the United Nations and World Health Organization in issues of national interest, such as public health, constitutional rights, and the interpretation of the law according to international standards of human rights, as an *abuse of power*. For the ultraconservative right, these interventions are undue meddling into matters of national interest

that force countries to accept definitions and norms, such as gender and reproductive rights, in a way that undermines individual freedoms and national culture and traditions.

The quest for a reproductive Reconquista should not be seen just as a mere moral endeavor led by religious extremists or fundamentalists. It is much more than that. There is, of course, a connection with these Christian righteous expressions of religious integralism. But this project goes beyond the salvation of the soul and the protection of moral values in quite complex ways. The Reconquista is not only moral but also political, economic, and cultural. The project aims to retake the political power and freedoms that conservatives and their allies feel have been taken from them in illegitimate and violent ways.

To understand its nuances, let us focus on the term *Reconquista* (I am, of course, appealing to what it is popularly known as the Spanish Reconquista). As García-Sanjuán (2020 133) explains:

the notion of a Spanish Reconquista is the product of 19th-century Spanish Nationalist thinking. Although developed as an academic concept, it played, at the same time, a crucial political and ideological role, thus holding a very powerful and potentially toxic ideological burden, chiefly consisting of the idea that Spain is a nation shaped against Islam. Its dual academic and ideological nature makes it a highly problematic concept that greatly contributed to produce a largely biased and distorted vision of the Iberian medieval past, aimed at delegitimizing the Islamic presence (al-Andalus) and therefore at legitimizing the Christian conquest of the Muslim territory.

Similarly, the term *gender ideology* was developed by neo-integrist Catholic scholars working closely with the Vatican (Arguedas-Ramírez 2020b). The term was designed to give the appearance of secular and academic reasoning. However, it is fundamentally a neo-integrist narrative that conveys the rejection of feminist claims and, more importantly, transmits the idea that gender ideology is a lie made up to

defend political agendas that negate rational and scientific evidence. In this way, their ideological motivation is hidden behind the accusation that they are directing at their adversary. For these neo-integrist Catholic intellectuals, *gender ideology* designates the core feminist philosophical arguments on which women and LGBTQ movements are rooted: gender roles are socially constructed and enforced through violence, gender hierarchies are forms of oppression based on the concentration of privilege on certain males, and sexuality is naturally diverse. These ideas, for neoconservative intellectuals, are “ideology.”

Likewise, the narrative of the Spanish Reconquista has been weaponized in Spain by right-wing political organizations, such as the extreme right-wing political party VOX. Moreover, VOX’s narrative has been celebrated by right-wing extremists in other countries. In 2018, when VOX won twelve seats in Andalusia’s senate, the American Ku Klux Klan leader and Nazi sympathizer, David Duke, posted a tweet celebrating the result: “the Reconquista begins in the Andalusian lands and will be extended to the rest of Spain” (*El País* 2018). In France, the extreme right-wing politician Éric Zemmour founded the nationalist political party Reconquête (Pidgeon 2023), promoting an inflammatory narrative based on nationalist, xenophobic, and conservative tropes. Reconquête and Vox generally share the same political objectives and strategies, such as instigating xenophobic hate, moral authoritarianism, and nationalist emotions. As explained by Cuenca-Navarrette (2023), both political parties argue that secularization leads to the destruction of the society they see as superior and endangered by mass immigration, demographic decline and the loss of traditional values. The only way to stop this menace is by defending a civilizational project based on Christian universalism.

The concept of a reproductive Reconquista points to an ongoing and far-reaching political, economic, and cultural process. The social transformation the movement is trying to achieve is profoundly ingrained in politicized religious beliefs that shape individual and collective identities while also serving as outlets for social groups that feel betrayed and abandoned by the ruling class. They also profoundly clash with political ideals and institutions embedded in the Enlightenment.

This fantasy of reconquering political institutions, geographical territories, social and economic privileges, and entitlements, such as the power of dominion—the theocratic idea that Christians are called by God to exercise dominion over every aspect of society by taking control of political and cultural institutions<sup>2</sup>—is tremendously appealing to large swaths of the population in many different countries. Cultural and geopolitical differences notwithstanding, we should pay attention to the commonalities between the diversity of neoconservative mobilizations. For instance, extensive research has been conducted on protests against gender ideology, sexual education, contraceptive access, and other sexual and reproductive rights issues in countries such as Paraguay, Chile, Costa Rica, Poland, Hungary, the United States, Mexico, Germany, Spain, and Brazil (Vaggione and Machado 2020; Arguedas-Ramírez 2020a).<sup>3</sup> They share the same basic messaging and strategies because they are all connected to a broader sociopolitical project, which a handful of organizations have been supporting with funding, training of conservative activists, and other strategies, for many years (Fitzgerald and Provost 2019). In 2020 openDemocracy published a database and an investigative report detailing how Christian Right fundamentalist organizations in the United States have spent millions of dollars supporting conservative religious-political groups working against women’s and LGBTQ rights in Europe,

<sup>2</sup> “Dominionism can be summarized as the theocratic idea that Christians are called by God to exercise dominion over every aspect of society by taking control of political and cultural institutions: for example, over the role of government, the form and content of public education, and eliminating rights related to bodily autonomy” (Clarkson 2022). See also Dorrien (2005).

<sup>3</sup> See also the Spring 2020 dossier “Las ofensivas antigénero en América Latina: <https://forum.lasaweb.org/past-issues/vol51-issue2.php>.

Latin America, and Africa. They have managed to evade taxes and controls because the money moves through organizations registered as churches. In this way, they do not have the legal obligation to disclose financial operations (Archer and Provost 2020).

The question that follows is, then, what are the territories, privileges, and power that this reproductive Reconquista is trying to take “back”? First of all, women’s bodies, and not only for reproductive and sexual purposes, but also for economic and symbolic purposes. Privileges linked to an idealized traditional masculinity and to hierarchies of power and prestige require strict social norms based on gender roles. For instance, without a clear masculinist gender order, there is no basis for establishing and normalizing the reproductive division of labor, the imposition of care as a feminine *raison d’être* and, therefore, a political economy that makes acceptable an economic system based on the exploitation of women’s domestic work. From this perspective, it can be easier to understand why feminist and gender studies have become the target of right-wing populist political leaders across the globe, including Viktor Orbán in Hungary, Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil, and congressman Fabricio Alvarado in Costa Rica.

In some regions, the nationalist or racial dimension of the reproductive Reconquista is more salient than in others, but all have in common a strong xenophobic feeling fueled by the fear of being replaced by another race or culture (a conspiracy known as the Great Replacement). Therefore, the only way to prevent being replaced by another “race” or culture is by incentivizing reproduction by the “superior race” and obstructing reproduction of the undesirable “inferior races.” In this way, it is clear that the neoconservative “pro-life” narrative that criminalizes abortion, the structure of health care, and social determinants of health that induces a highest maternal mortality rate in Afro-American women, and the practice of forced sterilization of migrant women in detainee centers in the United States do not constitute an internal contradiction

in their moral code. On the contrary, there is internal consistency within the ideological framework of reproductive Reconquista.

The reproductive Reconquista shares with the Spanish Reconquista key elements of illusion, nostalgia, and fantasy. Never did the Catholic Church or men as a collective or the economic elite in any particular time and place have absolute control over women. Even in the most violently patriarchal societies, women have always found ways to resist or to negotiate spaces of freedom and self-determination. Nonetheless, the idea prevails in contemporary sexist discourse that there was a time when men exerted absolute dominion over women, either because that is the natural way of things or because it is the will of God. The contemporary narrative that sustains the existence of such a thing as the Spanish Reconquista is also based on a distorted image of the past, in which “Spaniard” Christians valiantly reclaimed control over territories that were invaded by Muslims.

As García-Sanjuán (2020 140) explains: “This approach stands for the most powerful myth of the origins of the Spanish nation, which, accordingly, would have been shaped in the fight against Islam. On the other hand, it represents a highly biased reading of the past aimed at delegitimizing the Islamic half of medieval Iberia and at legitimizing the other Christian half. When weaponized for political goals, this approach is not only misleading but also extremely toxic and even dangerous.”

Both Reconquistas are based on the fantasy of power and dominion over the *other*. This dominion is the source of their honor, identity, and sense of purpose. The reproductive Reconquista is fueled by the symbolic power of a lost world in which everything followed the natural or divine order of things. Their project, therefore, is to reclaim once more that which they see as theirs to hold and control. Therefore, the particularities of the reproductive Reconquista in Latin America are inextricably linked to the colonial legacy that still endures in that region. As Martínez (2009) describes, the dominant matrix in Latin America, rooted in its

historical colonial origins, has linked religion, politics, and the market for centuries through networks of sociability that include politicians, businesspeople, and cultural and religious leaders. In this way, a social-political-religious field emerged that cuts across all socioeconomic classes and sectors of society. This complex field, can be traced from the present back to the independence of Spain.

Additionally, Catholic and Evangelical hierarchies played decisive roles in Central America during the period of the Cold War. According to Cangemi (2018), before the Second Vatican Council, Central American elites were very close to the Catholic Church. But after the rise of liberation theology and the rise of a Catholicism more critical of social injustice and inequality, elites turned to neo-Pentecostal groups linked to US conservative and anticommunist groups. The paradigmatic example of such an alliance is Guatemalan dictator Efraín Ríos Montt (Tureck 2015). This progressive Catholic phase did not last long, however. During the papacy of John Paul II, while Cardinal Ratzinger was head of the Vatican's Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, liberation theology priests, nuns, and laypeople were persecuted, tortured, and killed by national-security-doctrine military governments with US funding. The Vatican did nothing to protect them and, in some instances, even demonstrated more affinity to those governments than to the victims of the right-wing campaign against social justice movements (Levine 1990).

In any case, the Cold War set the stage for Protestant denominations to grow at a steady pace, threatening Catholicism's hegemony in Latin America. Despite the historical competition between these Christian traditions, today strategic and pragmatic alliances prevail. There is not much left of liberation theology Catholicism. Most Evangelical and Catholic churches and organizations have accommodated their narratives in a way that is useful to a right-wing politics. More specifically, Catholic neo-integralism and neo-Pentecostal fundamentalism have joined forces in the reproductive Reconquista, as can be seen

clearly in their mutual support for the campaign against gender ideology (Hodzic and Bijelic 2014; Garbagnoli 2016).

The bottom line is that these political-religious movements are stronger together. They have been tremendously successful in deploying political strategies to limit and even revert the protection of sexual and reproductive rights in many countries. The generalized effect of these mobilizations in the United States, Latin America, and Europe has debilitated the fundamental pillars of the secular state: scientific education, freedom of speech, and religious neutrality in public policy matters (Brown 2006).

### **The link between the reproductive Reconquista and refeudalization**

According to Neckel (2013, 2019), *refeudalization* refers to a series of connected economic and political processes of privatization of public assets and spaces, the hyperconcentration of power in nonstate actors, the reprivatization of social policy and services (as private charity or as family obligations), and the financialization of the economy. But most important: "Over the past two decades, numerous capitalist countries have experienced developments in social inequality which exhibit clear signs of refeudalization. Characteristic features of this development are the extremely one-sided preferential treatment of those at the pinnacle of society. These social elites enjoy historically unprecedented levels of wealth, while the lower strata are not only pauperized, but are increasingly exposed to relations of work that no longer satisfy the elementary standards of modern contractual relationships" (Neckel 2019, 6).

Kaltmeier (2022, 303-304) explains that refeudalization refers "to those elements, discourses, and positions that show a high analogy to feudal elements but unfold their effectiveness in the current capitalist world system." He developed seven theses based on the particularities of the Latin America's context: the refeudalization of the social structure, the economy, values, spaces, the political field, identity politics, and political rationality.

Now, how do the reproductive Reconquista and refeudalization connect with each other? The cases of Trump in the United States and Bolsonaro in Brazil serve as examples. Right-wing populism, inflamed by neoconservative narratives calling for heroic warriors to defend tradition, honor, and order, have transformed the contemporary political landscape in a way that reminds us, somehow, of medieval religious wars.<sup>4</sup> Then, I propose to include neoconservative reproductive politics, deprivatization of religion, and antidemocratic politicization of religious activism as marks of refeudalization. The particular process of desecularizing the public and political spheres produced by the reproductive Reconquista is fundamentally antidemocratic because its main goal is to gain moral and political control over every aspect of daily social life. Even though the process of secularization in Latin American has been incomplete and, to some extent, a legal formality, its effects were crucial for consolidating democratic regimes in the region and granting basic rights for women. In the United States, for instance, secularity was a foundational characteristic of the Constitution, but it has been eroded through conservative judicial activism.

In fascist, colonialist, and nationalist political projects, reproductive politics has a determinant place because the reproduction of the people they believe to be superior must be secured. These economic and political projects require something that, to this day, cannot be replaced by any technological means: pregnancies. Consequently, women's bodies are indispensable. And even more indispensable are women's subjectivities. The reproductive Reconquista needs women socialized to be devoted to traditional motherhood. But more importantly for this project, children must be educated to oppose and fight against the enemies of the reproductive Reconquista: mothers have the duty to raise the future fighters for righteousness.

That is why public education is at the center of the culture wars. Many Evangelical fundamentalist and Christian nationalist communities in the United States have been promoting homeschooling because they consider secular education a moral threat to their children. But in the framework of the reproductive Reconquista, the objective no longer is to protect children from external influences but to demand and achieve a total transformation of the public education system. In other words, their mission is to desecularize public education using secular strategies, such as appeals to constitutional rights, political participation to elect their candidates, and the promotion of conservative teachers to workplace activists (Apple 2006).

As has been studied by Morán Faúndes and Viaggioni (2012), among others, neoconservative movements are emulating successful political and social strategies implemented by progressive organizations and political parties. They are doing it also at the international level (Zaremborg, Tabbush, and Friedman, 2021), competing against feminist and other social organizations at forums such as the Organization of American States and the United Nations (Moragas 2020; Morán-Faúndes 2022). Their efforts have been directed against the advancement of women's and LGBTQ rights, and against any form of legal limitation in the individual exercise of religious freedom. Weaponizing conscientious objection has been key to obstructing women's reproductive rights (e.g., abortion, contraception, voluntary surgical sterilization) in Latin America and in some European countries (Sonfield 2018).

By claiming they are defending freedom and fundamental values, these warriors of the reproductive Reconquista are trying—and with success in some instances—to reconquer as many aspects and spaces of daily life as possible: education, health care, arts and entertainment, electoral politics. This process is

<sup>4</sup> In this space it is not possible to elaborate on the role of Medievalism in the reproductive Reconquista and refeudalization. But it is relevant to point out that Medievalist imaginary played a role in online narratives in favor of Trump and Bolsonaro. There were memes and pictures of them dressed as crusaders and even gatherings of supporters wearing medieval paraphernalia. See for instance Pachá 2019, Millar 2021 and MacLellan 2023. Also relevant is the link between criminal gangs and neo-Pentecostal Militias in Brazil (Hinz et al 2021).

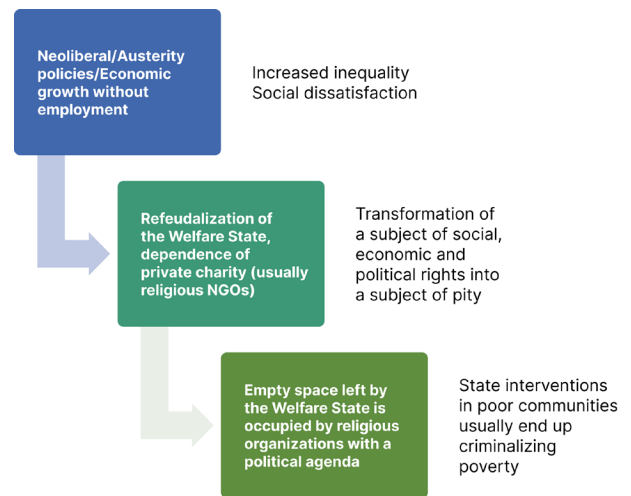
radically antiseccular and antidemocratic. They reject the idea that religious mandates are circumscribed to their specific community of believers. However, their rhetorical strategies are not restricted to religious tropes. On the contrary, in this reproductive Reconquista, a variety of communications strategies has been displayed for specific needs and audiences—for instance, narratives from Catholic neo-integralism, which has produced an extensive arsenal of documents using refined philosophical argumentation without referencing sacred texts (Arguedas-Ramírez 2020b). And they know how to capture media and social attention, deploying more colorful political slogans such as “Con mis hijos no te metas,” “No a la ideología de género,” “Cultural Marxism,” “Culture of death,” or “God made them Adam and Eve, not Adam and Steve.”<sup>5</sup>

A powerful example of the consequences of the continuing desecularization of the public sphere (Bettiza 2012) is the US Supreme Court’s ruling regarding the right to abortion. The *Dobbs* case, as it is known, revoked the rights guaranteed in *Roe v. Wade*. This ruling would not have been possible without Trump’s three Supreme Court appointments. It is evident that even though Trump is no longer in office, his legacy will have far-reaching consequences, even beyond the US jurisdiction. This is also a sign of the ongoing process of refeudalization.

To illustrate the socioeconomic impact of refeudalization from a social justice point of view, Figure 1 describes how economic, social and political issues interconnect. When the welfare state retreats from where it is needed the most, other sociopolitical actors fill that void. In Latin America that includes drug gangs and Evangelical fundamentalist churches (Misra 2023; Petri 2012; Brands 2010). But more important is that, when the state stops providing a minimum amount of support for vulnerable individuals and families, women are immediately expected

to provide all the care work (Arguedas-Ramírez 2020b; Bateman and Ross 2020; Bergallo et al. 2021).

**Figure 1. How refeudalization looks from a social justice point of view, based on Latin American examples.**



Moreover, refeudalization is intertwined with neoconservative religious ideologies of individual salvation and poverty and vulnerability as signs of moral failure and lack of faith. The so-called prosperity gospel is at odds with the ethical and political principles of the welfare state. Neoconservatism denounces any social or redistributive public policy as “socialist” or “communist.” Although Catholic neo-integralists do not follow the prosperity gospel, they agree with neo-Pentecostal fundamentalism in considering charity (the virtue of *caritas*) as the divine response to poverty and suffering. In this way, these organizations produce what I have conceptualized as “faith clientelism,” a specific disciplinary exercise of power (Arguedas-Ramírez and Chaves 2022). In exchange for food, medicine, and moral support, these political-religious organizations demand loyalty, obedience, and gratitude. This view of poverty not as a social problem to which the state and society must respond but as a consequence

<sup>5</sup> See, for instance, the declarations of Argentina’s extreme right candidate (and now, sworn President of Argentina) Javier Milei against *marxismo cultural*. <https://www.infobae.com/opinion/2022/05/20/javier-milei-y-su-guerra-contra-el-marxismo-cultural-la-oscura-historia-detras-del-termino/>.

of moral failures of the individual, is functional to the neoliberal state, and it is a step forward in the refeudalization of the state and society. The consequences are already evident. Recent empirical evidence demonstrates how prejudice against redistributive policies induces even vulnerable individuals to vote against candidates who support taxing the wealthy to fund social protection policies (Witko and Moldogaziev 2023).

At the core of these neoconservative narratives lies the idealization of the “natural” family, with one provider and one caretaker, free of state intervention. According to this ideological framework, this specific notion of family is essential for a good society and any other kind of family is a threat to the natural order of things. That is to say, the good society demands the specific model of femininity and motherhood that perpetuates and legitimizes the sexual division of labor and care and the specific model of masculinity and fatherhood that perpetuates the authority of the paterfamilias over women and children.

## Conclusion

In Latin America there are several examples of how the reproductive Reconquista is unfolding hand in hand with the ongoing process of refeudalization. In 2022 Bolsonaro came very close to winning reelection in Brazil’s presidential elections despite the several corruption cases filed against him. In Costa Rica, with the support of neo-Pentecostal fundamentalist politicians, the right-wing populist Rodrigo Chaves won the presidency in 2022, endangering one of the most stable democracies in the region. But the most revealing sign of the crisis we are dealing with is the undeniable success of the extreme neoconservative and libertarian Javier Milei in the last open primary elections (known as PASO, for *primarias abiertas simultáneas y obligatorias*) in Argentina, just two years after the legalization of abortion. The PASO elections in Argentina are mandatory primary elections for all directly elected national positions. Party lists and

precandidates must receive at least 1.5 percent of the vote (at the constituency or national level, depending on the office) to advance to the general election.

These politicians, as well as Nayib Bukele in El Salvador, many Republicans in the United States, and others in Poland, France, Germany, and Spain, have deployed clear messages aligned with the reproductive Reconquista’s narrative and its *cri de guerre*: the war against gender ideology.

The neoliberal assimilation of feminist and LGBTQ+ political demands, known as pink washing or gender washing, is the prelude of the reproductive Reconquista. Three decades ago it seemed that Latin American societies were starting to change their masculinist-patriarchal hierarchies. But that change was superficial and limited to just a few demands, ones that were easily assimilated by the neoliberal culture in a way that maintained the structural causes of inequality, discrimination, and oppression. Nonetheless, those symbolic and insufficient changes were enough to threaten conservative sectors.

Refeudalization, as the consecutive step in the current mode of neoliberalism in extremis, is necessarily incompatible with feminist and social justice demands. Then not only moral conservatives turned against those winds of gender and sexual emancipation. The economic rationale of extreme accumulation, dispossession, and extractivism works better under the sociocultural conditions of extreme religious conservatism and hegemonic masculinity. That is why the reproductive Reconquista is part and parcel of the refeudalization process, and it will continue to move forward for the foreseeable future because it appeals to large swaths of the population who sincerely believe that gender ideology is a real social danger.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>6</sup> This paper was finished before the election in which Milei won the Presidency.



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