

David Armando - Leonardo Pica Ciamarra

## **Introduction. Humanities under Attack**



Laboratorio dell'ISPF, XXII, 2025

[2]

DOI: 10.12862/Lab25RMD

On 14 February 2025, less than one month after Donald Trump inaugurated his second term as the President of the United States, a document of The Office for Civil Rights of the US Department of Education denounced the ‘diversity, equity and inclusion’ (DEI) policies, adopted by many universities of the country, as a form of racial discrimination violating Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964<sup>1</sup>. One month later, the same Department published a list of 45 universities which were investigated for embracing «racial preferences and stereotypes in education programs and activities»<sup>2</sup>. In the meanwhile, the Department of Justice’s Office of Public Affairs had announced an inspection at ten university campuses where ‘antisemitic incidents’ had been denounced since October 2023<sup>3</sup>.

This was the signal of a larger turmoil that hit US universities. On March 10<sup>th</sup>, 60 institutions of higher education all over the country received letters from the same Office for Civil Rights, menacing «potential enforcement actions» if they did not adopt measures to combat alleged episodes of «antisemitic harassment and discrimination»<sup>4</sup>. Under threat of US\$ 400 million in funding cuts, the leaders of Columbia University promptly agreed to the government’s demands and undertook disciplinary actions – including expulsions – against the students involved in pro-Palestinian demonstrations, reviewed its admission policies and put some academic Departments under receivership<sup>5</sup>. Similar demands were rejected by Harvard’s Dean, resulting in a freeze of fundings amounting to US\$ 2.3 billion, which was later deemed illegal by a court ruling on September 3<sup>rd</sup><sup>6</sup>. Suspensions of millions of dollars in funding and research grants also hit other institutions like Northwestern University, Pennsylvania University, Cornell, Brown and Princeton<sup>7</sup>. Financial pressures on Harvard’s leaders also included the threat of revoking the University’s tax-exempt status<sup>8</sup>, while a tight grip on international students’ visas was inaugurated by the Department of Homeland Security<sup>9</sup>, and leaders of student pro-Palestinian demonstrations were arrested and eventually subject to deportation from the

<sup>1</sup> <<https://www.ed.gov/media/document/dear-colleague-letter-sffa-v-harvard-109506.pdf>>.

<sup>2</sup> <<https://www.ed.gov/about/news/press-release/office-civil-rights-initiates-title-vi-investigations-institutions-of-higher-education>>.

<sup>3</sup> <<https://www.justice.gov/opa/pr/federal-task-force-combat-antisemitism-announces-visits-10-college-campuses-experienced>>.

<sup>4</sup> <<https://www.ed.gov/about/news/press-release/us-department-of-education-office-civil-rights-sends-letters-60-universities-under-investigation-antisemitic-discrimination-and-harassment>>.

<sup>5</sup> <<https://s3.documentcloud.org/documents/25577971/31325-letter-to-columbia.pdf>>; <<https://www.nytimes.com/2025/07/23/nyregion/columbia-trump-funding-deal.html>>.

<sup>6</sup> <<https://www.nytimes.com/2025/09/03/us/harvard-trump-funding-ruling.html>>.

<sup>7</sup> <<https://whyy.org/articles/trump-administration-universities-federal-money-targeted>>.

<sup>8</sup> <<https://www.washingtonpost.com/business/2025/04/16/trump-harvard-tax-exempt-irs>>.

<sup>9</sup> <<https://www.dhs.gov/news/2025/05/22/harvard-university-loses-student-and-exchange-visitor-program-certification-pro>>.

country<sup>10</sup>. The onslaught involved other universities over 2025 – some resisting governmental pressures while other reached deals – and led historian Ellen Schrecker to define Trump administration’s educational policy «much worse» than McCarthy’s anticommunist crusade in the late 1940s and the 1950s<sup>11</sup>.

As a part of this wide attack on academic bodies and higher education, the Department of Education itself was dismantled by an order signed by Trump as early as March 20<sup>th</sup>. Such a radical reform, expressly entrusted to the new Education Secretary Linda McMahon, struck an institution that the President had denounced during his campaign as infiltrated by «radical zealots and Marxists»<sup>12</sup>. Its abolition was the ultimate goal of the limitation of federal educational policies announced in his electoral program – the *2025 Project*<sup>13</sup>. In fact, the new administration’s attacks on academy were far from surprising, in light of the plan outlined by Lindsey M. Burke in the chapter devoted to education of the Heritage Foundation’s far-right manifesto<sup>14</sup>. Vice-president J.D. Vance – himself the product of Ivy League schools – had been even more explicit in singling out American higher education as an «hostile institution» and an «enemy» that needed to be «honestly and aggressively» attacked in order to realize the conservative program – as he stated in a conference held in November 2021<sup>15</sup>. Many measures implemented at federal level since 2025 had been anticipated in individual states governed by representatives of the MAGA movement, like Florida governor Ron DeSantis, whose controversial *Stop Woke Act* targeted academic freedom already in 2022<sup>16</sup>.

Trump administration’s restrictive science policy resulted in large scale cutting or freezing of funds directed to research topics unwelcome to far-right ideologies, spread across all disciplines – from climate change to vaccines, from gender studies and reproductive health to COVID-19. In biomedical sciences

<sup>10</sup> At Harvard, internal disciplinary measures prevailed (see, e.g., <<https://www.boston.com/news/education/2025/09/07/disciplinary-cases-tripled-at-harvard-due-to-pro-palestine-protests-student-newspaper-reports>>). On the national stage, there have been highly visible cases of judicial repression, although deportation orders were often halted by legal appeals. Among the most widely reported cases are those of Mahmoud Khalil at Columbia University (see, e.g., <[www.washingtonpost.com/education/2025/03/15/mahmoud-khalil-columbia-student-protester-ice-trump](http://www.washingtonpost.com/education/2025/03/15/mahmoud-khalil-columbia-student-protester-ice-trump)>) and Rumeysa Öztürk at Tufts University (see, e.g., <<https://www.reuters.com/legal/us-judge-halts-deportation-turkish-student-tufts-2025-03-29>>).

<sup>11</sup> <<https://www.thenation.com/article/society/mccarthyism-universities-trump-attacks>>.

<sup>12</sup> <<https://www.politico.com/news/2023/01/26/trump-unveils-education-policy-culture-war-00079784>>.

<sup>13</sup> *Mandate for a Leadership. The Conservative Promise. Project 2025*, Washington D.C., The Heritage Foundation, 2023, p. 319.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 319-362. For an overview on the document see D.A. Graham, *The Project. How Project 2025 is Reshaping America*, New York, Random House, 2025.

<sup>15</sup> <<https://nationalconservatism.org/natcon-2-2021/presenters/jd-vance/>>.

<sup>16</sup> S. Balme, *Défendre et promouvoir la liberté académique. Un enjeu mondial, une urgence pour la France et l'Europe*, France Université, octobre 2025, <[https://franceuniversites.fr/wp-content/uploads/2025/10/20251015\\_Rapport\\_Defendre\\_et\\_promouvoir\\_la\\_liberte\\_academique.pdf](https://franceuniversites.fr/wp-content/uploads/2025/10/20251015_Rapport_Defendre_et_promouvoir_la_liberte_academique.pdf)>, p. 69.

the impact of these cutbacks has been intensified by those involving USAID and by the US withdrawal from the World Health Organization, producing a severe impact on public health worldwide<sup>17</sup>. However, the field of Social and Human Sciences (SHS) has also been particularly affected by the storm. Entire disciplines are likely to be erased from the US higher education programs by the government's research policies, due to their immediate or remote political implications or simply in the context of Elon Musk's crusade against unproductive public spending.

The exclusion of Plato from an ethics course at a public university in Texas, where the regents, under political pressure, banned «topics related to sexual orientation or gender identity» from classrooms, is but the most recent and most puzzling example of censorship that does not spare the classics of Western thought<sup>18</sup>. In a list of over 350 keywords considered unacceptable by the Trump administration, those concerning culture(s), races, minorities and diversities, sex and gender, rights and privileges, justice and equality, as well as wide range lexemes like 'bias', 'ideology', or 'historically', occupy significant space along with terms concerning the environment, climate and pollution, energy, health and vaccines<sup>19</sup>. Not only are applications for research grants and other governmental support addressing such themes expected to be rejected, but also ongoing projects have been terminated<sup>20</sup>. The axe of Trump's policies and DOGE funding cuts even threatens the very existence of the National Endowment for Humanities as well as other federal agencies devoted to providing funds to cultural programs, like the National Endowment for the Arts and the Institute of Museum and Library Services<sup>21</sup>.

The impact of such restrictive policies on research projects, as well as on (especially younger) scholars' careers and lives, has been outlined in an editorial published anonymously – in order «to protect the author and his colleagues» – in the online journal of the American Anthropological Association<sup>22</sup>. Studies on non-Western history, cultures and societies in general are particularly under attack, because of their contribution to critical, anticolonial thinking and in some cases for their direct entanglement with controversial issues. The receivership imposed on Columbia concerned the Departments of Middle East, South Asian, and African Studies, and was in line with Burke's claim for shutting down the «so-called 'area studies' programs at universities» since they, ac-

<sup>17</sup> Cf. among others V. Yazdi-Feyzabadi, A.A. Haghdoost, M. McKee, A. Takian, E. Bradley, R. Brugh, N. Eyal, S. Eybpoosh, L. Gostin, N. Ikegami, I. Kickbusch, R. Labonté, R. Mannion, O.F. Norheim, J. Shiffman, M. Karamouzian, The United States Withdrawal From the World Health Organization: Implications and Challenges, *International Journal of Health Policy Management*, 2025, 14:9086. doi: 10.34172/ijhpm.9086.

<sup>18</sup> <<https://www.nytimes.com/2026/01/07/us/tamu-plato-race-gender.html>>.

<sup>19</sup> <<https://pen.org/banned-words-list/>>.

<sup>20</sup> <<https://www.thecrimson.com/article/2025/9/15/humanities-research-funding-cuts/>>.

<sup>21</sup> <<https://www.statehumanities.org/trump-proposes-elimination-of-neh/>>; <<https://news.artnet.com/art-world/congress-funding-bill-nea-neh-2735600>>.

<sup>22</sup> <<https://www.anthropology-news.org/articles/threats-to-anthropology-and-building-again-with-radical-kindness/>>.

ording to *2025 Project*, «although intended to serve American interests, sometimes fund programs that run counter to those interests»<sup>23</sup>. Such policies are impacting all aspects of academic freedom: freedom of research and teaching, as well as freedom of expression. An extraordinary measure like the last-minute cancellation of a special issue of the *Harvard Educational Review* on «Palestine and Education», decided by the university's administration in June 2025 after an evaluation of legal risks, shows how the threat of funding cuts by the federal administration is able to fuel censorship and auto-censorship practices<sup>24</sup> – a condition that recalls that of recent and older illiberal regimes<sup>25</sup>.

American history is no less under fire. Attempts to rewrite it are aimed at restoring a 'truth' consisting in the celebration of the Nation's «unparalleled legacy of advancing liberty, individual rights and human happiness», as against the «corrosive ideology», imputed to the Biden administration, charged with denigrating the US's past as racist, sexist and oppressive. The Smithsonian Institution – which administrates some major museums in Washington D.C., including the National Museum of the American Indian and the National Museum for African American History and Culture – has undergone a radical turn in its policies, introduced by Trump in March 2025. Projects «that degrade shared American values, divide Americans based on race, or promote programs or ideologies inconsistent with Federal law and policy» are among the initiatives that have been banned. The argument against racial distinctions ineptly seeks to conceal the intention to assert MAGA's principle of the identity of the United States as a white and Christian nation. This narrative totally contradicts both its multiethnic roots and the long history of racial conflicts that led to the institution of the legal equality of civil rights.

Historians, as well as philosophers and social scientists, working on politically crucial topics have been particularly and directly subject to the repercussions of Trump's policy, and have been among the first academics to flee the country, while many colleagues in all fields have declared their intention to do so<sup>26</sup>. Jason Stanley, Marci Shore and Timothy Snyder, scholars of fascism, decided to move from Yale to the University of Toronto in June 2025, protesting against the earlier attacks on universities<sup>27</sup>. Other colleagues have been forced to leave in order to avoid prosecutions. The most well-known case is probably that of former Rutgers University historian Mark Bray, the author of *Antifa: the*

<sup>23</sup> *Mandate for a Leadership*, cit., p. 356.

<sup>24</sup> <<https://www.thecrimson.com/article/2025/7/24/harvard-educational-review-palestine/>>, <<https://fr.timesofisrael.com/trump-face-au-monde-universitaire-craintes-pour-la-recherche-sur-le-moyen-orient/>>.

<sup>25</sup> See R. Darnton, *De la censure. Essai d'histoire comparée*, Paris, Gallimard, 2014; for a specific context, V. Frajese, *La censura in Italia. Dall'Inquisizione alla polizia*, Roma-Bari, Laterza, 2014; G. Caravale, *Libri pericolosi. Censura e cultura italiana in età moderna*, Roma-Bari, Laterza, 2022.

<sup>26</sup> <<https://www.nature.com/articles/d41586-025-00938-y>>.

<sup>27</sup> <<https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2025/jun/16/why-a-professor-of-fascism-left-the-us-the-lesson-of-1933-is-you-get-out>>.

*Anti-Fascist Handbook*<sup>28</sup>, who received death threats after becoming the target of a petition launched by Turning Point USA, the conservative advocacy association founded by Charlie Kirk. Prof. Bray and his family finally managed to board a plane to Spain on their second attempt on 9 October 2025, after finding a previous booking cancelled under unclear circumstances<sup>29</sup>.

The situation in Europe is also far from tranquil, although it varies significantly across national contexts. The restriction of academic freedom and scholarly debate in Germany in the wake of renewed tensions surrounding the Israeli-Palestinian question is emblematic. In Germany, and more broadly throughout Europe, this issue has effectively become a litmus test for the boundaries of permissible discourse within academic institutions, particularly with regard to the degree of dissent tolerated vis-à-vis the largely convergent positions adopted by governments. Despite internal variations, EU states have generally confined themselves to expressions of regret over civilian casualties, while avoiding any substantive distancing from Israeli policies.

Of course, a full understanding of the German case requires attention to the country's specific historical legacies. The *Schuldfrage* and the postwar commitment to support the Jewish state under all circumstances have contributed to foster a particular sensitivity toward criticism of Israel, coupled with an acute fear of any alleged overlap between criticism of Israeli policies and antisemitic sentiment. Within this context, what has been described as a process of «bureaucratization of the fight against antisemitism»<sup>30</sup> has also emerged. Official commissioners for monitoring, identifying, and publicly targeting individuals and groups have been appointed at federal and state level, as well as in single institutions, including universities<sup>31</sup>. It often happens that they intervene even when accusations of antisemitism appear quite questionable. Recent examples include the campaign against the president of the Technical University of Berlin, who was forced to make a public apology for having liked a social media post drawing a comparison between Nazism and the policies of the Netanyahu government<sup>32</sup>; the widespread depiction of an intellectual of Jewish origin such as Judith Butler as an emblem of alleged antisemitism<sup>33</sup>; the withdrawal in 2024 of the Albertus Magnus Professorship awarded to feminist philosopher Nancy

<sup>28</sup> M. Bray, *Antifa: The Anti-Fascist Handbook*, Melville House, New York 2017, <<https://files.libcom.org/files/Antifa,%20The%20Anti-Fascist%20Handbook.pdf>>.

<sup>29</sup> <[https://www.lemonde.fr/international/article/2025/10/15/mark-bray-historien-americain-menace-de-mort-pour-ses-travaux-sur-l-antifascisme-s-exile-en-europe\\_6646949\\_3210.html](https://www.lemonde.fr/international/article/2025/10/15/mark-bray-historien-americain-menace-de-mort-pour-ses-travaux-sur-l-antifascisme-s-exile-en-europe_6646949_3210.html)>.

<sup>30</sup> Cf. D. Della Porta, *Guerra all'antisemitismo? Il panico morale come strumento di repressione politica*, Altraeconomia, Milano, 2024.

<sup>31</sup> <<https://www.antisemitismusbeauftragter.de/Webs/BAS/EN/home/home-node.html>>.

<sup>32</sup> <<https://www.tu.berlin/en/about/organization/executive-board/tu-berlin-responds-to-x-account-activity>>.

<sup>33</sup> <<https://www.zeit.de/kultur/2023-11/judith-butler-israel-hamas-university-english/komplettansicht>>.

Fraser's<sup>34</sup>; speaking bans affecting figures such as Yanis Varoufakis and the rector of the University of Edinburgh<sup>35</sup>; etc.

When focusing specifically on the academic sphere, this broader picture must be further contextualized by the high level of employment precarity within German universities: approximately 90 percent of courses are taught by non-tenured lecturers. As has been noted<sup>36</sup>, such structural precarity weakens the capacity for critical opposition within academia and contributes to a pervasive silence in moments of crisis. Precariously employed scholars constitute an ever-growing share of the academic workforce and are dependent on the renewal of short-term contracts. At the same time, even the research agendas and career trajectories of tenured academics are increasingly tied to externally funded projects, often governed by explicit compliance requirements imposed from above. Openly critical positions therefore tend to be expressed under conditions of relative anonymity, frequently through collective actors in which, however, the participation of established academics remains limited due to fear of professional repercussions<sup>37</sup>. Contemporary recruitment and funding regimes in universities and research institutions have thus contributed decisively to the erosion of researchers' independence and freedom of critical expression. While this dynamic extends well beyond Germany and affects academic research and higher education across Europe to varying degrees, the German case offers a particularly visible illustration of a trend with which academic communities will likely be forced to contend. It is furthermore unsurprising that the disciplines most severely affected are those most closely associated with the critical interrogation of public discourse, the analysis of values, the reconstruction of historical processes and the production of their narratives.

Central to these restrictions on academic freedom and freedom of expression is the adoption of the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA) Working Definition of Antisemitism, adopted in 2016 by the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA) conference in Bucharest. As early as 2019, the Conference of University Presidents (*Hochschulrektorenkonferenz*), representing the vast majority of German universities, formally endorsed the definition, which also addresses various forms of criticism of the State of Israel. Member institutions of the Conference have since been expected to apply and disseminate it internally as a key reference for identifying and address-

<sup>34</sup> Cf. <<https://www.uni-koeln.de/en/university/news/news/news-detail/withdrawal-of-the-albertus-magnus-professorship-2024#:~:text=The%20Albertus%20Magnus%20Professorship%20at%20the%20University,academic%20and%20cultural%20boycott%20of%20Israeli%20institutions>>.

<sup>35</sup> Cf. <<https://www.yanisvaroufakis.eu/2024/04/13/my-berlin-speech-on-palestine-that-german-police-entered-the-venue-to-ban>>.

<sup>36</sup> Cf. M. Delori, Will German academia surrender without condition?, *Political Anthropological Research on International Social sciences* (PARISS), 2024, 5 (2), pp. 119-165; S. Balme, *Défendre et promouvoir la liberté académique – Un enjeu mondial, une urgence pour la France et l'Europe*, cit., pp. 77 ff.

<sup>37</sup> See for instance collectives such as Allianz für Kritische und Solidarische Wissenschaft, <<https://krisol-wissenschaft.org/>>, or Academics for Justice, <<https://www.academicsforjustice.com>>.

ing alleged manifestations of antisemitism<sup>38</sup>. Beyond the university sector, the IHRA Definition has been integrated into a wide range of administrative and educational contexts, including official handbooks, training programs, and guidelines issued by public authorities. In addition, parliamentary resolutions adopted by the Bundestag and several state parliaments have invoked the definition to guide public funding decisions and to condition institutional support on compliance with its principles, often in conjunction with formal opposition to pro-Palestinian movements such as the *Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions* campaign (BDS). The influence of the IHRA Definition thus operates less through explicit legislative prohibitions than through the pervasive diffusion of a normative framework that has become professionally risky to contest. Its authority is exercised via institutional expectations, administrative practices and funding mechanisms.

This definition is directly invoked by pressure groups<sup>39</sup> that have led, to cite only the most recent examples, to the cancellation of the workshop «The Targeting of Palestinian Academia» scheduled to take place at Ludwig Maximilian University of Munich on 28 November 2025. This event, convened by the Chair of Arabic and Islamic Studies with the participation of scholars from Al-Quds University in Jerusalem and Birzeit University in Ramallah, was annulled by the University due to «doubts as to whether the event met the necessary academic standards»<sup>40</sup>. Ten days earlier, a similar fate befell the workshop «Jews. Despite Germany» organized by the Jewish queer scholar Udi Raz, initially scheduled as part of the master's program in Religion in the Public Sphere at Leibniz University Hannover, and subsequently withdrawn following what the University described as «massive pressure, also directed at her and her students» experienced by the responsible professor<sup>41</sup>. Beyond the particular concerns regarding the contents at stake, such cases (alongside of many others of the same kind: a dedicated website has been set up in Germany<sup>42</sup>) raise a broader concern regarding the freedom of discussion and inquiry into topics that cannot be excluded from the critical mission of the humanities.

<sup>38</sup> Cf. European Commission, *Handbook for the practical use of the IHRA Working Definition of Antisemitism*, published jointly with the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance, with support from the German Presidency of the Council of the European Union, 2021 <<https://www.holocaustremembrance.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/handbook-for-the-practical-use-of-the-IHRA-definition-ofantisemitism.pdf>>.

<sup>39</sup> <<https://israel-academia-monitor.com/2025/11/26/germanys-middle-east-studies-association-becomes-anti-israel/>>.

<sup>40</sup> <<https://www.lmu.de/en/about-lmu/structure/central-university-administration/media-relations-and-communications/press-room/press-release/lmu-as-a-place-of-pluralistic-discourse-d7e85faa.html>>. Cf. the protest statements by the Deutsche Arbeitsgemeinschaft Vorderer Orient, <[https://davo1.de/wp-content/uploads/2026/01/17112025-CAF-Brief-an-LMU-Weber-Goetz\\_ohne-Unterschriften.pdf](https://davo1.de/wp-content/uploads/2026/01/17112025-CAF-Brief-an-LMU-Weber-Goetz_ohne-Unterschriften.pdf)>, and by the Association of Palestinian and Jewish Academics, <<https://pja-verein.de/2025/11/18/statement-lmu/>>.

<sup>41</sup> <<https://www.haz.de/lokales/hannover/hannover-antizionistin-raz-tritt-an-leibniz-uni-auf-juedische-buerger-in-sorge-MRMDRMGUXNCPLN22ZW5SDRMT7I.html>>.

<sup>42</sup> <[https://archiveofsilence.org](https://archiveofsilence.org/)>.

In many countries, as well as in Germany, the IHRA Definition has been leveraged to subvert an imperative principle of civility and justice, such as the vigilance, refusal and fight against any form of antisemitism, into a general dispositive of control and repression – including regrading freedom of research, teaching and speech. Despite the criticism it received, even from outstanding Jewish scholars, the Bucharest declaration has been adopted or endorsed in 43 countries, including the USA<sup>43</sup>, where Trump incorporated it in Title VI of the Civil Rights Act during his first term<sup>44</sup>. Thanks to this measure – and despite the failure of an even more binding bipartisan ‘Antisemitism Awareness Act’ to pass the Senate during Biden’s Presidency<sup>45</sup> – the IHRA declaration has become a tool for the present administration to target universities. Some of these, like Harvard and Columbia, finally adopted it as their guideline for defining and countering antisemitism, in order to comply with government requests<sup>46</sup>.

Compared to other European democracies like Germany – let alone the case of authoritarian countries like Hungary – Italy currently appears to be relatively less affected by political interference in research and teaching, although the general plans for reforming its university system or reorganizing research institutions remain still not fully clear. Nevertheless, the very instrument that we have seen employed elsewhere as a means of repressing dissent now appears to be taking shape in Italy as well. While this text is being written, a heated debate is underway concerning various draft bills submitted to the Parliament by representatives of both the right-wing governing majority and the centre-left opposition, all aiming to introduce the IHRA Definition into the republican legislation<sup>47</sup>. Some of these bills are explicitly oriented towards its application within academic spaces, and controversy has centered on the risk that this

<sup>43</sup> S. Bangstad, The Palestine Exception to Academic Freedom and the IHRA Definition of Antisemitism, *The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, 53, 2025,3, pp. 689-700, <DOI: 10.1080/03086534.2025.2494669>.

<sup>44</sup> <<https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/presidential-actions/executive-order-combating-anti-semitism/>>.

<sup>45</sup> <<https://www.congress.gov/bill/118th-congress/house-bill/6090>>; <<https://www.congress.gov/bill/119th-congress/senate-bill/558>>.

<sup>46</sup> <<https://www.thecrimson.com/article/2025/1/21/harvard-settles-antisemitism-lawsuits/>>; <<https://www.columbiaspectator.com/news/2025/07/15/columbia-adopts-new-definition-of-antisemitism-partners-with-adl-for-antisemitism-training/>>; <<https://communications.news.columbia.edu/news/understanding-how-we-incorporate-ihra-definition-antisemitism>>.

<sup>47</sup> Among the various bills introduced in the Italian Senate in the last months, see: «Contrasto all’antisemitismo» (sen. Massimiliano Romeo, 30.1.2024), <<https://www.senato.it/leggi-e-documenti/disegni-di-legge/scheda-ddl?did=57902>>; «Disposizioni per l’adozione della definizione operativa di antisemitismo» (sen. Ivan Scalfarotto, 8.7.2025) <<https://www.senato.it/leggi-e-documenti/disegni-di-legge/scheda-ddl?tab=testiEmendamenti&did=59355>>; «Disposizioni per il contrasto all’antisemitismo e per l’adozione della definizione operativa di antisemitismo» (sen. Maurizio Gasparri, 6.8.2025), <<https://www.senato.it/leggi-e-documenti/disegni-di-legge/scheda-ddl?did=59493>>; «Disposizioni per la prevenzione e il contrasto dell’antisemitismo e per il rafforzamento della Strategia nazionale per la lotta contro l’antisemitismo nonché delega al Governo in materia di contenuti antisemiti diffusi sulle piattaforme on line» (sen. Graziano Delrio, 20.11.2025), <<https://www.senato.it/leggi-e-documenti/disegni-di-legge/scheda-ddl?did=59733>>.

definition of antisemitism may be used to target expressions of dissent towards Israel.

Less prominent, despite being explicitly recalled by historian Simon Levi Sullam in his audition before the Italian Senate<sup>48</sup>, is another argument raised in relation to former, apparently more widely shared legislative proposals aimed at sanctioning Holocaust denial, which were debated between 2007 and 2016<sup>49</sup>. In that case, while there was no doubt as to the abject nature of the behaviors to be penalized, the concern raised within the community of historians, including eminent intellectuals of Jewish origin such as Carlo Ginzburg, derived from the principle that a historical truth might be established by law. Highly significant appeals were circulated, arguing that propositions which are proven false, politically unacceptable and morally abhorrent, such as the denial of the existence of extermination camps, should be countered within the scholarly domain. Their legal sanction – the signatories warned – risked, on the one hand, proving counterproductive by fueling denialist propaganda, while, on the other resulted in the formulation of a crime of opinion, thus establishing a precedent that could later be extended to more controversial subjects. The judicious compromise reached in the end was to consider denialism punishable when embedded within a perspective of racial hatred, while preserving the non-punitive status of historiographical and scientific debate, even in its most unrestricted forms<sup>50</sup>.

The concern within the Italian historical communities regarding the legal definition of a shared historical truth was to be reinforced in later years, as the controversy shifted to the inherently more divisive issue of the *foibe* – i.e. the episodes of mass killing of Italians in Istria and Dalmatia committed by Yugoslav partisans after the defeat of the Fascist army in WWII. Public appeals and scholarly review editorials were signed, denouncing public stigmatization of those scholars who sought to relativize this phenomenon by situating it within the broader context of the violence committed by Fascist occupation troops<sup>51</sup>. Also stimulating historians' reactions was a law proposal intended to extend the sanction against Holocaust denial in order to punish «the negation, minimization or apology» of those massacres. The proposal finally failed to be approved by the Parliament<sup>52</sup>, while in the North-Eastern regions bordering former Yugoslavia, local governments suspended all support to associations and

<sup>48</sup> <<https://webtv.senato.it/webtv/commissioni/contrasto-allantisemitismo-0>>.

<sup>49</sup> G. Turi, Negazionismo: in Italia non è reato, *Storia e Futuro*, 43, 2017, <<https://storiae-futuro.eu/negazionismo-in-italia-non-e-reato/>>.

<sup>50</sup> <<https://www.camera.it/leg17/561?appro=OCD25-278>>.

<sup>51</sup> <<https://www.archiviobollettino.unict.it/articoli/sissco-solidariet%C3%A0-allo-storico-eric-gobetti>>; <<https://www.istoreto.it/2024/02/19387/>>; <<https://www.clio92.org/2021/02/17/solidarieta-a-eric-gobetti/>>.

<sup>52</sup> <[https://www.senato.it/show-doc?leg=18&tipodoc=DOSSIER&id=1298260&idoggetto=0&part=dossier\\_dossier1](https://www.senato.it/show-doc?leg=18&tipodoc=DOSSIER&id=1298260&idoggetto=0&part=dossier_dossier1)>.

initiatives not aligned with the mainstream narrative presenting the Italians of Istria and Dalmatia as passive victims of ethnic cleansing<sup>53</sup>.

Political efforts to orient academic debate represent a major issue also in France. Although the IHRA definition has not been implemented in the French legal system, an instrumental and intimidating use of categories as ‘wokism’ and ‘islamic-leftism’ (*islamo-gauchisme*) has been denounced at least since 2021<sup>54</sup>, and allegations of antisemitism against scholars have multiplied after October 2023, in a scientific context where, for historical and social reasons, studies on the Middle East and the Arabic world are particularly alive. The most striking episode took place in November 2025 at the Collège de France, one of the country’s outstanding academic institutions, where a meeting on the history of the relationship between Palestine and Europe was canceled. The initiative was organized by the holder of the chair of Contemporary History of the Arabic World, Henry Laurens<sup>55</sup>. Its withdrawal was announced by the administration of the institution at the very last moment for alleged security reasons<sup>56</sup>, in the wake of a press campaign which depicted the conference as antisemitic, and following heavy pressure from the government. While the meeting took place at a different venue<sup>57</sup>, an appeal signed by over 300 academics denounced the prohibition as «an unprecedented attack on academic freedom» and the start of an «age of institutional censorship»<sup>58</sup>. The polemics didn’t stop there. Among the academics who defended the withdrawal, sociologist Nathalie Heinich turned the call for «academic freedom» and the «autonomy of science» against the conference organizers, accusing them of «academic militancy»<sup>59</sup>. Such an instance of «strict neutrality», which had also been invoked by the administrators for justifying the cancellation of the conference, implicitly breaks with the ‘engaged’ tradition of French intellectuals, and has been rejected by academics like historian Patrick Boucheron – he too a professor at

<sup>53</sup> <<https://www.consiglio.regione.fvg.it/pagineinterne/Portale/comunicatiStampaDettaglio.aspx?ID=622197>>; <https://www.consiglioveneto.it/documents/34871/b95e97c8-50ee-4479-b69d-34e3c6757994>). See M. De Niccolò, Sull’uso politico della storia, *Il Mulino*, 1 March 2021, <[https://www.rivistailmulino.it/news/newsitem/index/Item/News:NEWS\\_ITEM:5551](https://www.rivistailmulino.it/news/newsitem/index/Item/News:NEWS_ITEM:5551)>.

<sup>54</sup> <[https://www.lemonde.fr/societe/article/2023/03/29/enquete-sur-l-islamo-gauchisme-a-l-universite-histoire-d-une-vraie-fausse-annonce\\_6167488\\_3224.html](https://www.lemonde.fr/societe/article/2023/03/29/enquete-sur-l-islamo-gauchisme-a-l-universite-histoire-d-une-vraie-fausse-annonce_6167488_3224.html)>; S. Balme, *Défendre et promouvoir la liberté académique*, cit., pp. 80-87.

<sup>55</sup> <<https://www.college-de-france.fr/fr/agenda/colloque/la-palestine-et-europe-poids-du-passe-et-dynamiques-contemporaines>>.

<sup>56</sup> <<https://www.college-de-france.fr/fr/actualites/annulation-du-colloque-la-palestine-et-europe-poids-du-passe-et-dynamiques-contemporaines-des-13-et>>.

<sup>57</sup> <[https://carep-paris.org/revoir\\_ecouter/la-palestine-et-leurope-poids-du-passe-et-dynamiques-contemporaines](https://carep-paris.org/revoir_ecouter/la-palestine-et-leurope-poids-du-passe-et-dynamiques-contemporaines)>.

<sup>58</sup> <[https://www.lemonde.fr/idees/article/2025/11/11/interdiction-du-colloque-la-palestine-et-l-europe-au-college-de-france-cette-decision-ouvre-la-voie-a-une-ere-de-censure-institutionnelle\\_6653048\\_3232.html](https://www.lemonde.fr/idees/article/2025/11/11/interdiction-du-colloque-la-palestine-et-l-europe-au-college-de-france-cette-decision-ouvre-la-voie-a-une-ere-de-censure-institutionnelle_6653048_3232.html)>.

<sup>59</sup> <[www.lemonde.fr/idees/article/2025/11/14/nathalie-heinich-sociologue-le-programme-du-colloque-annule-au-college-de-france-la-palestine-et-l-europe-constituait-une-offensive-contre-la-science\\_6653416\\_3232.html?random=1103869561academic](https://www.lemonde.fr/idees/article/2025/11/14/nathalie-heinich-sociologue-le-programme-du-colloque-annule-au-college-de-france-la-palestine-et-l-europe-constituait-une-offensive-contre-la-science_6653416_3232.html?random=1103869561academic)>.

the Collège de France – who invoked the difference between France and the US and recalled that «a conference is above all a place of knowledge, not a place of debate submitted to the need of plurality of opinions»<sup>60</sup>.

These are only some of the contours of what appears to be a general reconfiguration of the relationship between knowledge and power, considered specifically from the perspective of the management of knowledge as a critical function, and of the humanities in particular. In our survey, we have sought to approach these developments focusing on some of their most advanced manifestations. Scholars who accepted to contribute to this issue offer us different perspectives – not necessarily coinciding with those proposed in this introduction – that are deeply rooted in their respective fields and national contexts.

The politics of the Trump administration have polarized the attention concerning threats to knowledge for both its brutality and its novelty. A country which used to present itself as the homeland of freedom – including freedom of speech – and which had actually represented a safety harbour for intellectuals escaping from authoritarian regimes – who largely contributed to the incredible rise of its economic and military strength over the XX<sup>th</sup> century – suddenly closed its doors to foreign scholars and students while becoming a place from which academics may be pushed to escape for political reasons. Nonetheless, what Trump's war against academies has dramatically projected in the foreground, is a more long-term process, which has been experienced over the last decades in the context of the authoritarian turn undergone by countries like Turkey or Hungary.

Márk Áron Éber's essay provides a compelling analysis of Viktor Orbán's regime in the latter country, demonstrating how the Hungarian government has sought to radically restructure the institutions responsible for knowledge production while advancing an ideology that challenges the traditional dominance of intellectual elites. Orbán's strategy of power consolidation is firmly grounded in the creation of hegemony in a Gramscian sense, directly informed by his early studies of Gramsci. In this effort, he has not only reshaped Hungary's traditional intellectuals but has also organized a historical bloc aimed at securing comprehensive control over the country's cultural and public discourse.

Indeed, even in the United States current authoritarian policies are not born out of nowhere. If McCarthyism represents a striking yet distant precedent, two essays in this issue analyze deeper processes that have contributed to the crisis we are witnessing. David A. Hollinger offers a nuanced perspective on the politics of knowledge, exploring the tension between conservative evangelicalism and academic freedom, which is perceived by the former as a threat to the dissemination of values aligned with their understanding of Christianity. The ascendancy of the evangelical faction over the ecumenical wing of the Re-

<sup>60</sup> <[https://www.lemonde.fr/societe/article/2025/12/18/un-mois-apres-l-annulation-du-colloque-sur-la-palestine-l-unite-reste-fragile-au-college-de-france\\_6658473\\_3224.html](https://www.lemonde.fr/societe/article/2025/12/18/un-mois-apres-l-annulation-du-colloque-sur-la-palestine-l-unite-reste-fragile-au-college-de-france_6658473_3224.html)>.

publican Party, particularly since the Trump era, has increased opposition to the modernizing challenges previously embraced by a historically conscious Christian culture. The convergence of evangelical sensibilities with conservative Republicans' apprehension of an unregulated academy that might challenge their economic doctrines has resulted in an unprecedented constriction of academic freedom.

Remaining within the American context, Stefano Villani examines how US universities have become arenas for political and identity-driven conflicts, particularly under the Trump administration. The progressive dismantling of diversity and inclusion initiatives and the erosion of academic freedom have become especially apparent in debates surrounding Israel, antisemitism, and student protests. Nonetheless, Villani argues that these developments cannot be simply reduced to a return to authoritarianism but must be understood as indicative of a profound epistemological crisis within the humanities, particularly regarding presentism, identity-driven scholarship, and the erosion of disciplinary norms. Cultural trends once dominant, now under attack, bear significant responsibility for the current state of academic discourse.

While the U.S. case demonstrates the strictly instrumental use of financial pressures for political purposes, in other contexts the former hold, at least at first glance, a greater centrality. Yet, in the case of the selective dismantling of SHS departments, they underlie the assertion of a cultural and political vision with respect to which the humanities are an unnecessary cost, if not an obstacle<sup>61</sup>. Turning to Europe, James Whitley illuminates this dimension of the challenges facing the humanities, stemming both from the 'woke' left and the anti-woke right. He analyzes the systematic dismantling of classical studies and, more broadly, of the very concept of the 'classics', tracing these developments to scenarios predating what might appear as a more recent authoritarian turn and revealing its continuity with previously less overtly ideological knowledge policies. Focusing on Wales, he demonstrates how the study of Classics – alongside religion and theology – has gradually been marginalized. The growing disregard for these disciplines, often deemed 'old-fashioned', has facilitated the rise of an instrumentalist conception of knowledge fundamentally at odds with the founding principles of academic institutions.

Far from being local phenomena, cuts in the humanities refer to a global context increasingly dominated by private corporations. Claudio Cozza and Salvatore Prinzi turn their attention to the rise of Big Tech, which has emerged as a formidable actor in the struggle over knowledge. These technology giants appropriate knowledge through monopolistic control and integration with state and military structures. Their growing influence within Europe raises critical

<sup>61</sup> On this issue, after the classic formulation in M.C. Nussbaum, *Not for Profit: Why Democracy Needs the Humanities*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2010, cf. among others H. Small, *The Value of the Humanities*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2013; Stefan Collini, *What Are Universities For?*, Penguin, London, 2012; N. Ordine, *The Utility of the Useless*, Bloomsbury, London, 2017.

questions about freedom of access to data and knowledge, highlighting the urgent need for alternatives that foster collective and independent research.

We are well aware that these contributions represent only a fragment of the ongoing scholarly attempts to engage with a vast and multifaceted emergence, one that directly impacts our institutional, scientific, and cultural frameworks. Across diverse regions of the world, knowledge has become a contested terrain to be conquered, manipulated, and restructured, with the aim of neutralizing the subversive potential of critical thought while reinforcing dominant narratives and power structures. The essays that follow provide critical insights into different aspects and local viewpoints of this complex landscape, and offer particularly valuable material for our Observatory, whose mission is to illuminate, sequence, and connect events that can form the basis for shared reflection and collective awareness. In light of ongoing developments on the broader international stage, we hope to be able to continue this survey in forthcoming issues of our journal, extending our focus to additional European Union contexts as well as the Italian case.

